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HOLLYWOOD BUL

MICHAEL LEVIN

It is easy, and accurate enough, to call writer-producer-director Warren Beatty's *Bulworth* one of the most repellent films ever made. But that would be too simple.

Odious as it may be, *Bulworth* is also instructive—in its marketing, its critical reception, even in its own undeniable virtues.

The movie's plot, in broad outline, is one that most RRR readers, probably most Americans, will resonate to. Jay Billington Bulworth

(Beatty), incumbent Democratic Senator from California, is sick at heart. No longer standing for anything, a puppet of special interests, he has come to treat the average voter as someone to be bamboozled on election day and ignored thereafter. His reelection ads show hokey home movies of his happy family ("Spooning those vegetables looks dynamic," gushes a sycophantic aide), when in reality his wife despises him and sleeps around.

So Bulworth decides to end it all. To provide for his family, he squeezes a \$10,000,000 life insurance policy from a lobbyist (more of that later), and then commissions a hitman to do him in. But newly liberated by his impending death, with nothing to lose, he suddenly becomes...honest. Frank. Willing to speak his mind. Reborn as a Holy Fool, an Ivan Illyitch of the campaign trail, he sounds off at rallies and on TV. But, irony of ironies, his new-found candor restores his will to live. The balance of the movie depicts the swathe Bulworth cuts, while he simultaneously tries to avoid being bumped off.

Much of *Bulworth* is quite funny, and I found myself laughing aloud many times. Beatty might have been one of his era's great comics had he not been promoted as a pretty-boy. But political satire, especially of the innocence-taking-on-corruption type, is a familiar genre; just think of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Yuks alone don't explain why *Bulworth* is being touted as "a high-wire act," "daring," "taboo-shattering," "a scandal," and

"an outrage." The hype has to do with the ideals Bulworth yearns for, and what he says when the spirit of truth is upon him.

The movie begins with Bulworth quietly weeping in his Washington office, surrounded by photos and drawings of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, and of himself—i.e. a

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young Warren Beatty—with Kennedy. Very quickly the goals he has abandoned are made clear: what depresses him is a stump speech he is planning in which he attacks welfare and vows to "end unnecessary affirmative action." (If eliminating "unnecessary" race preferences is enough to drive Bulworth/Beatty to suicide, what would the thought of ending all preferences do?) An insurance industry bigwig (Paul Sorvino in maximum menace mode) bribes him—with that \$10,000,000 policy—into promising to stop a bill that requires insurance companies to sell policies to people who can't

afford them. I myself would vote for the new Bulworth like a shot, but he is obviously supposed to be contemptible.

Soon after comes the film's one modestly daring moment. Scheduled to address a black church, Bulworth discards his prepared text to scold the congregation about drinking malt liquor and idolizing O.J. Simpson. It is indeed remarkable to find unflattering remarks about blacks in a contemporary Hollywood movie;

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I half expected a modern day Morals Squad to burst in and smash the projector. But Bulworth quickly clarifies his meaning. Where blacks have gone wrong, his harangue continues, is in believing that the Democratic Party really cares about them. In reality, Democrats care no more about blacks than Republicans do, and blacks who think otherwise are fools. In other words, the Great Truth Bulworth articulates is that Whites Are Untrustworthy, and its corollary, that Blacks Must Beware of Whites. That message, or some variant, pretty much exhausts the ideological content of the movie: Blacks Won't Get Their Fair Share Until They Recognize How Bad Whites Are.

That one idea is one idea more than most movies have, but to anyone even faintly aware of contemporary public discourse it is not exactly original. It is, on the contrary, a thudding cliché, an endlessly repeated tenet of the left-liberal world view. One cannot turn on the TV or open a newspaper without meeting it. Beatty is being called a daring radical for, in effect, believing what he reads in the *New York Times*.

Now back to our story. The blacks in church, after first being offended, like what they hear, and Bulworth likes them right back. This mutual admiration even awakens the supernatural in the person of Leroi Jones, a one-Rastafarian Greek chorus who periodically reminds Bulworth to be "a spirit, not a ghost." (The enduring spirit of Robert Kennedy, perhaps?) Bulworth also ends up in the company of a decidedly corporeal Halle Berry in an after-hours black dive. She agrees to hide him at her family's house in the 'hood.

(N.B. Like other black actresses allowed to interact romantically with white male leads—one also thinks of Angela Bassett and Vanessa Williams—Halle Berry has extremely light skin and Caucoid features. Evidently Beatty did not quite have the courage of his convictions in this department.)

On its face, the ensuing depiction of black life is strongly negative. Most of the Berry character's family is illegitimate, has illegitimate children, or is somebody's half-brother. As she prepares collard greens for the lot, the black matriarch sings to herself about

having something between her legs. On filthy abandoned streets Bulworth meets a gang of gun-toting underage drug dealers run by a black Fagin. Everyone calls everyone else "nigger." But blacks themselves are not to blame for their sorry estate.

Berry explains in an oddly didactic speech—almost a burlesque of policy wonkery—that manufacturing jobs have gone overseas, while Fagin complains that you can't support a family flipping hamburgers, that slum schools "f—ed up" by indifferent politicians do not prepare black youth for more gainful employment, etc. (Nobody asks how whites built Western civilization without help from benign overseers.) Bulworth witnesses the dèrrière white racist cop in action.

As a result of these experiences Bulworth's transformation is complete; he dons a homeboy's outfit—baggy shorts, a knit cap, shades—and begins to speak in rap couplets. In an amusing send-up of TV interviews, Bulworth appears thus attired to chat with a Barbara Walters clone, and no matter what he says or does she keeps trying to jam the show back into a conventional format. And it is here that Bulworth/Beatty sums up what seems to be his hope for America.

For the economy, the solution is "Socialism!—don't be afraid of the word." And as for the race problem, and I quote, "Everyone got to keep f—ing everyone 'till we're all the same color." Please note: years ago when some of its critics complained that the civil rights movement was really all about "mongrelizing the races," they were dismissed as

sex-obsessed cranks. According to Bulworth, it turns out that they were right.

But Bulworth's demented behavior has an amazing result. His polls rocket skyward. Wouldn't you guess it; people unused to honesty from a politician just love him. And as for blacks, well, he is their new Moses to lead them from the wilderness. Fagin twirling a cigarillo as he hears Bulworth repeat word for word his explanation of black crime is as thoughtful as the onlookers in Rembrandt's drawing of Christ preaching. He even orders his goons to stop breaking legs.

The best news of all is that the gunman after Bulworth was none other than Halle Berry, who now of course knows and loves him. Being whiter than Berry (though not by much), Bulworth momentarily experiences anxiety. Just before his new lady fair reassures him with a big kiss, he says "Of course I'm insecure, I'm a white guy." You just know Beatty loved writing that line.

By now Bulworth has awakened from his fever dream, exchanged his homie duds for a suit, and reassumed some of the phoniness of the professional politician. (He compliments the matriarch on her collard greens.) I'm not sure what symbolic significance this reversion is supposed to have, but in any case, like the Ancient Mariner, Bulworth has been permanently changed. He is all set to lead the country on a crusade for justice, fairness and socialism, except for...Paul Sorvino, the insurance lobbyist.

Looking grimmer every scene, he has finally had enough when Bulworth reveals that in America the insurance industry takes twenty-four cents of each dollar spent on medical care while the Canadian government-run system consumes only three cents of each health care dollar. So, in the final seconds of the movie he or some henchman shoots Bulworth dead. In the genuinely spooky fadeout, Leroi Jones wanders past the hospital where Bulworth has been taken.

The positions Bulworth takes may be left-liberal boilerplate about race, but the fact that they are paraded as revolutionary throws some light on the Hollywood left mindset. One aspect of this mind is its extraordinary narrowness. Even a modest retreat from the welfare state, remember, is sufficient grounds for suicide. A free society where each man is responsible for his own fate, where success reflects value to others, and where groups that do poorly have only themselves to blame, is wholly outside this frame of reference.

Second—probably the key factor in what makes radiclubs tick—rich, successful, lionized figures like Warren Beatty need to think of themselves as a brave minority to keep their morale up. By describing themselves as embattled underdogs bravely speaking out against ubiquitous evil racists they become the good guys. Why, go too far and an insurance agent just might take you out. And it's not Beatty alone who flatters himself. Almost the entire critical community, as I've said, is giddy

with the absurdity that *Bulworth* is somehow dangerous. (That's also why the left can't stop talking about McCarthy; there were a couple of years a half-century ago when being pink was actually a little risky.)

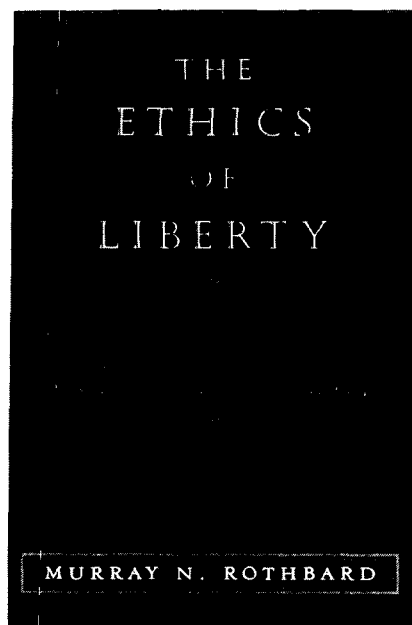
Most baffling, and depressing, is the intelligence behind *Bulworth*. As in previous efforts like *Reds* and *Dick Tracy*, Beatty has organized all

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aspects of movie-making—dialogue, photography, music—into something the viewer is not likely to forget. In fact *Bulworth* is so striking, so much of a piece, that it can be watched as a *satire*, a savage parody of liberalism created by an antagonist who nonetheless knows perfectly how liberals think. So how can a guy that clever believe the junk he does, and, worse, believe he is the only believer? While we're at it, how come all of Hollywood, TV, publishing—the whole military-industrial-entertainment complex—is run by obviously brilliant people who believe so many obvious idiocies? I wish I knew.

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