

Brian Tomasik  
Analysis of Two Movies  
Summer 2004

Our lives are shaped by our definitions of what is important. The decisions we make, the priorities we set, the opinions we hold, and the lifestyle we adopt all stem from our own conceptions of what is most worthwhile. This idea is demonstrated in two black-and-white movies from roughly the same time period: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), directed by Frank Capra, and *Citizen Kane* (1941), directed by Orson Welles. In each film, a central character spends most of his life concerned with wealth, prestige, and power—only to realize that, in the end, it is concern for one another that truly matters.

In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, that character is Joseph Paine, an inveterate senator from Montana. Though he entered Washington with idealistic hopes for change, Paine soon found it necessary to bow down before the interests of political-machine boss Jim Taylor if he wished to preserve his Senate seat from ruthless assault by the newspapers and radio stations that Taylor controlled. Paine supports the appointment of boy-scout hero Jefferson Smith to fill the seat of his recently deceased Senatorial companion, in the hopes that Smith's inexperience and naïve patriotism will prevent him from discovering Taylor's plan for graft on Montana's Willamette Creek. When Smith happens to introduce a bill for the construction of a boys' camp on that very same creek, Taylor forces Paine to bring falsified charges of corruption against Smith, who filibusters in order to delay his expulsion from the Senate and tell his side of the story. Near the end of his protracted speech, a haggard Smith reminds Paine of his youthful conviction that "lost causes" are the only causes worth fighting for. After Smith collapses on the floor of the Senate chamber, Paine's guilt and mercy overcome him, and he runs out of the room, loudly proclaiming the veracity of Smith's charges against him.

Up until this point, Paine was mostly concerned with himself: he knew that the elimination of Smith was the only way to protect his own power and reputation against Taylor's falsified propaganda and against Smith's truthful allegations. But the sight of Smith—worn and exhausted, yet determined to continue—was so moving to Paine that he was forced to change his priorities. Whether he maintained his Senate seat or lost it was inconsequential, he realized, by comparison to the lives of thousands of boys who would be profoundly impacted by his actions. Whether his reputation was preserved or tarnished was trivial, he realized, when compared against the ability of dedicated citizens to succeed in the face of corrupt special interests. It was the inspiring spectacle of one man with the courage to stand up against all odds that finally allowed Paine to understand that it was Smith's cause that was truly important.

*Citizen Kane* involves a similar realization. To an even greater extent than Paine, this film's protagonist, Charles Foster Kane, devotes his life to the pursuit of power and prestige. He is able to mold public opinion through the broad readership of his *New York Inquirer*. He plays an instrumental role in the American declaration of war on Spain in 1898. He dominates his second wife, Susan, and forces her to become an opera singer against her will. And he orders the construction of Xanadu, a colossal palace filled with rare animals and works of art. Yet, Kane remains unhappy and restless, and every new attempt to seek fulfillment leaves him feeling even more hollow inside.

As he dies alone in his bed, Kane utters one last word—"Rosebud," the name of the sled he owned as a small child before his parents sent him away to boarding school in the East. It was at this moment that Kane realized what had been most important in his life and what he had been missing all along: his sled and all that the sled represented—love and attention from his

parents, freedom from obligation, and a place where he could truly belong—all of which had been taken away from him at an early age.

Both *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Citizen Kane* involve the discovery that a meaningful life comes not from power or fame or wealth but, rather, from love and family and concern for something higher than oneself. And while each film was uniquely extraordinary in portraying this, I preferred Capra's style. Welles conveyed his message with a dark and dismal tone, and he seemed to imply that one cannot understand the valuable parts of life until it is too late, until the moment of death has arrived (indeed, the living reporters had no more luck in their search for the meaning of "Rosebud" than Kane himself did during his lifetime). Capra, in contrast, demonstrated that there is still time for people to change. Instead of leaving viewers pessimistic, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is inspirational in its message that political reform will come only from the hard work, persistence, and motivation of aroused citizens.