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The Genesis and Ideology of *Gabriel over the White House*

Robert L. McConnell

Yea, while I was speaking in prayer, even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation.

And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, O Daniel, I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding.

—*The Book of Daniel*, 9:21,22

Few moments in American history have been more bleak than the first days of March, 1933. For more than three years the nation's economic health had been steadily ebbing, taking with it much of the remaining sense of national purpose. The political leadership drifted, with an increasingly paralyzed and frustrated Herbert Hoover in the White House. It was our "winter of despair," that winter of 1932-33, and many Americans seemed too disillusioned to care, much less to revolt.¹ No one seemed to know whom to blame or what to change. Franklin D. Roosevelt was about to take office, but his campaign rhetoric had offered little promise of immediate relief.

In this vacuum there were scattered calls for a strong national leader, but they had the ring of reluctance and wistfulness. *Barron's* magazine, acknowledging the contradiction of proposing a dictatorship in a democracy, mused editorially that

a genial and lighthearted dictator might be a relief from the pompous futility of such a Congress as we have recently had. . . . So we return repeatedly to the thought that a mild species of dictatorship will help us over the roughest spots in the road ahead.

More graphically, *Barron's* bared its soul:

Sometimes openly and at other times secretly, we have been longing to see the superman emerge.²

¹ William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), ch. 2.

² "Semi-Dictator?" *Barron's*, vol. 13, no. 7 (Feb. 13, 1933), p. 12.

Such half-formed dreams, however, were a far cry from advocacy, and hardly anyone was quite prepared for a serious suggestion that such a “superman” could be visualized as President of the United States. An extraordinary motion picture previewed March 1, 1933, in Glendale, California—three days before Roosevelt’s inauguration—did just that. *Gabriel over the White House*, an object lesson in narrative form, told the story of a divinely inspired chief executive who simply seizes the power necessary to solve the nation’s gravest problems.

The film’s title itself was unusual, although familiar to readers of some prestigious American and British magazines and newspapers, who had learned in February that an Englishman had just anonymously published a book by that name. American reviewers of the novel were confused about its intentions and far from unanimous in their reception; some labeled it an obvious satire, while others fretted about the possible consequences of its credibility.

Hollywood trade journals generally took the film seriously, welcoming it as good for business and for the country. *The Hollywood Reporter* declared that *Gabriel over the White House*

will probably go down in the history of motion pictures as the most sensational piece of film entertainment the world has ever known and, as such, will attract more people to . . . America’s theatres than any motion picture of the present age. . . .

Moreover, the paper continued, the film’s message

may put an end to the great problems that confront our nation today by showing them how a President of the United States handled the situation and the marvelous results he attained.³

Variety praised its timeliness:

Wrapping all the world’s ills in one bundle and sewerling them is going to appeal to the present mental temper of America. At no time in the past 25 years was the U.S. as ready and ripe for a production of this type as right now.⁴

Not all of Hollywood was as happy with the film, least of all the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer executives responsible for overseeing its production. Among the audience at the preview was Louis B. Mayer, a stalwart Republican and firm supporter of Herbert Hoover. Mayer, who had not seen the film before the preview, was aghast. When it was over, Bosley Crowther writes, Mayer

³ “‘Gabriel’ a Sensation,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Mar. 2, 1933.

⁴ Untitled, *Variety*, Mar. 3, 1933.

strode from the theater like an crushing thundercloud, grabbed hold of Eddie Mannix, and shouted loud enough for people to hear, "Put that picture in its can, take it back to the studio, and lock it up!"

Mayer, Crowther explained, was reported to have interpreted *Gabriel* as critical of Hoover and Warren Harding and, even worse, as propaganda for the incoming Roosevelt administration.⁵

The film did not stay locked up. Mayer instead shipped it to New York, where it was screened and pondered by Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America—and a reliable Republican—and MGM president Nicholas M. Schenk. They agreed with Mayer, and back went *Gabriel* to California for alterations. A Hollywood dispatch to the *New York Times* reported that MGM was "gravely concerned" about the film:

A number of film leaders here felt that because of economic and political conditions it was unwise to show a film which might be regarded by the nation at large as subversive and by foreign countries as invidious.⁶

Exactly what changes were made and by whom remains obscure.⁷ According to Crowther, Walter Wanger, the MGM supervisor who had originally chosen the story (and who was a Democrat), strongly resisted all suggested script changes. But there were some deletions and reshooting, and it was April (a month later) before distributors finally received prints of the film. It had taken MGM more time to make *Gabriel* presentable than for the original version to be made; the shooting consumed only 18 days, Crowther reports, at a cost of \$180,000, with \$30,000 more for retakes.⁸

⁵ Bosley Crowther, *Hollywood Rajah: The Life and Times of Louis B. Mayer* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1960), pp. 179-80.

⁶ Mordaunt Hall, "'Gabriel' Film Sent Back to Hollywood," *The New York Times*, Mar. 17, 1933, p. 21, col. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.* Mordaunt Hall wrote the following account:

It is reported that in this original form the film depicted Hammond as insulting and very bombastic at Cabinet meetings, that the newspaper correspondents after an interview with Hammond ridiculed the President in the press room; that the relations between Hammond and the girl [his friend and secretary, Pendola Malloy (Karen Morley)] were anything but platonic; that the unemployed army was met by Hammond in Washington and that the President's speech was too bitter; that a crooked politician was appointed Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, instead of to Greece as in the revised film, and that several other incidents were considerably toned down.

The release print obviously retained much of Hammond's aggressiveness with the Cabinet, and the implication is inescapable that he spent at least one night (before his conversion) with Miss Malloy.

⁸ Crowther, pp. 178-80. Wanger, Crowther said, had planned for the film to premiere simultaneously in four cities (including Washington and New York) on Inauguration Day.

A considerable flurry of publicity accompanied the film's release, but almost buried in the credits—and sometimes wholly omitted—was the name of the man most responsible for its production, William Randolph Hearst. Once Wanger had shaped the story into script form (for which he employed writer Carey Wilson), he had taken it to Hearst. The publisher, according to Crowther, was "delighted with the story. It appealed to his sense of irony."⁹ Hearst gave the script to the film branch of his empire, Cosmopolitan Productions, which rushed to put the screenplay on film in collaboration with MGM.

The genesis of *Gabriel over the White House*, however, was not this simple. The novel took form in the mind of Thomas F. Tweed, a political organizer and close adviser to David Lloyd George, former British prime minister (1916-22) and long a major figure in the Liberal Party. Tweed had risen through Liberal ranks, stopping only for service in World War I. Immediately after the war he helped establish the Liberal Summer School, an important movement in British political history and one that included the economic theorist John Maynard Keynes.

Tweed assumed his role as Lloyd George's political counsel in 1926, at a time of steadily dwindling Liberal strength in Parliament. Lloyd George had resigned his party's leadership in 1922, after six years as prime minister, but his most significant achievements were farther in the past. During the first decade of the century the irascible political leader had been, in one historian's words, a "leading architect of Britain's most spectacular social revolution." Lloyd George's "People's Budget" of 1909 was laden with unprecedented social-reform measures, and his national health and unemployment insurance bill of 1911 became a cornerstone of Britain's welfare system.¹⁰

There is little biographical information about Tweed, but it seems reasonable to conclude that his ideas coincided generally with (and were obviously affected by) those of Lloyd George. There is less doubt about the affinity between Lloyd George and William Randolph Hearst; they were very good friends and frequently met socially when the publisher visited his castle in Wales.¹¹ How much each influenced the other is conjectural, although many elements of Hearst's editorial platforms (and, for that matter, Roosevelt's New Deal) are discernible in the writings, speeches, and legislative activity of Lloyd George. Their temperaments were markedly similar; one description of Lloyd George's traits would apply almost unqualifiedly to Hearst:

⁹ Crowther, p. 178. As I shall indicate, this was a considerable understatement.

¹⁰ Martin Gilbert, "Introduction," in Martin Gilbert, ed., *Lloyd George* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 13; 5-6.

¹¹ Frances Lloyd George, *The Years That Are Past* (London: Hutchinson, 1967), p. 230. She recalls that "Colonel Tweed" was "fearless in expressing his opinions" to Lloyd George, and "sometimes uncompromising in character," p. 220.

He was . . . an outsider, a nonconformist, a dreamer. Proud of his national traditions, champion of the underdog, enemy of privilege, master of ridicule, lover of music. . . . He strove first to improve the conditions of his compatriots, then to ameliorate international dissensions. He pursued these aims tenaciously, and often with marked success.¹²

Tweed wrote *Gabriel over the White House* while vacationing on a cargo vessel in the Mediterranean in the summer of 1932. In a letter to his American publishers, Farrar and Rinehart, he noted that his vacation had "provided the boredom" necessary to put his ideas on paper. He attributed the theme of the novel partly to chance conversations with fellow passengers and, more specifically, to H. Gordon Selfridge, a prosperous American department store owner in London.¹³

What had apparently intrigued Tweed was a speech which the merchant delivered that June to the American Chamber of Commerce in London. Selfridge said a recent trip to the United States had left him feeling "extreme sorrow over my country's conditions" because "no one is able to step to the bridge and steer safe to port." He then expressed a conviction not uncommon during the booming 1920s—a decade to which, perhaps, Selfridge looked longingly: "In my judgment the country should be managed as a great business controlled by an inspiring, unselfish spirit. . . ." Pessimistic about the future of democracies—whose doom he predicted within two centuries—Selfridge called for the kind of leader who was to emerge vividly in *Gabriel over the White House*: "We don't know enough to govern ourselves. We need a leader to do the thinking while we attend to our own affairs. . . ." A banker had told him, Selfridge said,

that if he were a benevolent dictator he would do three things to help recovery—abolish prohibition, adjourn Congress and impose a sales tax.¹⁴

Wholeheartedly adopting the concept of benevolent dictatorship, Tweed brought to fictional life an American president whose scope of action surpassed the banker's program.

When Hearst first saw the screenplay based on Tweed's novel,¹⁵ Cosmo-

¹² Gilbert, p. 14.

¹³ Quoted in Mordaunt Hall, "Gabriel over the White House," *The New York Times*, Apr. 9, 1933, IX, p. 3, col. 1.

¹⁴ "Selfridge Declares Democracy a Failure; Predicts Its End Within 100 or 200 Years," *The New York Times*, June 22, 1932, p. 10, col. 3.

¹⁵ The book was first published in February 1933 as *Gabriel over the White House: A Novel of the Presidency* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart). Another edition, titled *Rinehart: A Melodrama of the Nineteen-Thirties* (London: A. Barker), appeared almost simultaneously. Tweed's only other known novel is *Destiny's Man* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1935), which had been published in 1934 in London by A. Barker under the title *Blind Mouths*. The *British Museum General Catalogue* lists a shorter version of *Gabriel over the White House* (190 pages, versus the original 309) as having been published in 1952 by Kemsley Newspapers.

politan Productions had never produced a film with explicit political or social content. The company, in fact, seems to have existed up to that point primarily as a means for Hearst to insure prominent roles for his very close friend, the actress Marion Davies. Most of Cosmopolitan's films before 1933 had been lighthearted musicals that did not recoup their production costs.¹⁶ But that did not dissuade Hearst from continuing to make them, or from embarking on a new venture in film making. He seems to have been strongly attracted to *Gabriel over the White House*, and with good reason: the dominant ideology of the story coincided closely with some of his most cherished beliefs.

3

One attraction for Hearst the journalist was perhaps the simplicity of the plot. Its structure was a series of episodic treatments of major public issues, with a minor romantic subplot. The film opens with the new president, tall, handsome Judson Hammond, taking the oath of office in 1941. Hammond (Walter Huston) is an amalgam of the small-minded political puppets who had held office at intervals before him; one is reminded most immediately, perhaps, of Warren Harding. Hammond's allegiance to his party (never identified in the film) is made clear at the outset in a brief inauguration-night exchange between the new president and his party cronies, especially campaign manager Jasper Brooks (Arthur Byron):

BROOKS

Did I keep my promise, Jud?

HAMMOND

Well, I'm in the White House . . . and considerably worried . . .

BROOKS

Why?

HAMMOND

. . . when I think of all the promises I made the people to get elected.

BROOKS

You had to make some promises. By the time they realize you're not gonna keep 'em your term'll be over.

¹⁶ Two of the best known were *When Knighthood Was in Flower* and *Little Old New York*, both made before Hearst moved the company from New York to Hollywood in 1922. Cosmopolitan became first an independent unit of MGM, then of Warner Brothers and later of Twentieth-Century Fox. Crowther briefly traces the history of Cosmopolitan Productions in *Hollywood Rajah*, pp. 122-26. King Vidor, in *A Tree Is a Tree* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), provides a sketchy insider's account of Hearst's operations in Hollywood. M. R. Werner, a former Cosmopolitan publicist, describes the New York phase of Hearst's film-making enterprise in "Yellow Movies," *The New Yorker*, Sept. 14, 1940, pp. 61-68.

HAMMOND

(to another party man)

Oh, thanks for those unexpected votes from Alabama.

MAN

Wait till you get the bill for them!

The new president is staunchly conservative but even that is overridden by his deliberate avoidance of issues and needs. Unemployment and racketeering are dismissed as "local problems," and the horrors of the depression will somehow disappear when confronted with the invincible American spirit. He confidently tells the press:

America will weather this depression as she has weathered other depressions—through the spirit of Valley Forge, the spirit of Gettysburg, and the spirit of the Argonne. The American people have risen before, and they will rise again. Gentlemen, remember: our party promises a return to prosperity.

Appointments and other favors are dispensed according to strict political loyalties: campaign manager Brooks becomes the new secretary of state (functioning mainly to keep the party's bit tightly in Hammond's mouth), and another party operative is made ambassador to Greece as a matter of expediency (Hammond to his Cabinet: "That's one way to get rid of him"). John Bronson, leader of a million unemployed men who are marching toward Washington to demand redress, is dismissed as a "dangerous anarchist" and subject to arrest if he approaches the White House.

Director Gregory La Cava skillfully depicts Hammond's obliviousness to suffering and to cries for justice in a scene that is perhaps the film's most cinematically distinguished sequence. As a radio fills the Oval Office with Bronson's plea for the president's help in getting his men to work, Hammond plays gleefully on the floor with his young nephew, apparently hearing nothing. Bronson's accusations are a powerful indictment of the failure of the federal government to provide moral and political leadership in a time of national crisis, and some passages surely caused Louis B. Mayer to wince:

People of America, this is John Bronson speaking not for myself but for over a million men who are out of work, who cannot earn money to buy food because those responsible for providing work have failed in their obligations.

We ask no more than that which every citizen of the United States should be insured: the right to live, the right to put food in the mouths of our wives and children. . . .

. . . I ask your President now [Hammond is on hands and knees] if he's ever read the Constitution of the United States as it was laid out by those great men that day in Philadelphia long ago—a document which guarantees

the American people the rights of life, liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness. All we ask is to be given those rights.

This country is sound. The right man in the White House can bring us out of despair into prosperity again. We ask him at least to try.¹⁷

As Hammond leaves the room, his nephew sits at the president's desk, blissfully stuffing marshmallows into his mouth.

Once Hammond's character is established, the film's crucial turning-point occurs. Speeding recklessly along a country road (an analogy to the pre-depression 1920s?), the president loses control when a tire punctures (the Wall Street crash?) and the car breaks through a fence. For two weeks he apparently hovers near death with a brain concussion (according to his physician), but we learn that in actuality he has been contemplating a vision of the Archangel Gabriel. After a team of doctors solemnly gives up hope, Hammond is shown close-up in bed: there is a far-away trumpet call, a few harp chords, the window curtains ruffle in a slight breeze, and a strong light falls on the bed. Hammond says nothing, but opens his eyes (perhaps a suggestion of reincarnation) and looks upward meaningfully. Thereafter he is a changed man.

At his first Cabinet meeting after recuperation he summarily fires Secretary of State Brooks for defending the possibility of using the army to disperse the unemployed veterans marching on Washington. Later he orders the secretary of war to use the military instead for humanitarian assistance:

HAMMOND

Mr. Secretary, the War Department will supply food, shelter and medical requirements to these men in their camp tonight.

SECRETARY

Mr. President, are you out of your mind?

HAMMOND

In 1918 we forced four million men to accept the hospitality of the government.

SECRETARY

But that was war!

HAMMOND

This is war. The enemy is starvation. As President of these United States my first duty is to the people.

Hammond visits the veterans at a mass outdoor rally in Baltimore, and

¹⁷ Here the screenwriter, perhaps at Hearst's behest, adds John Locke's specific protection of "property" to Jefferson's three rights (enumerated of course in the Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution), as the 14th Amendment did add it to the Constitution in 1866.

an opening backward tracking shot (amid the angry shouts of the crowd) tries to establish the audience's identification with the unemployed men. Hammond delivers an emotional and histrionic address with blatantly Lincolnian rhetoric. In it he not only affirms the obligation of the federal government to directly alleviate the economic distress of the citizenry, but also outlines a broad-scale public-works program that closely resembles the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (created two years after the film) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (passed hurriedly by Congress in March, 1933 at President Roosevelt's suggestion):

It is not fitting for citizens of America to come on weary feet to seek their President. It is rather for their President to seek them out and to bring to them freely the last full measure of protection and help. And so I come to you.

I feel certain the last thing you men want is charity—money for idleness and the demoralization which follows in its wake. . . .

You have been told there is no chance of getting work. But I say there is work, necessary work, waiting to be done. I'm going to make you a proposition. You've been called the army of the unemployed. You're soldiers trained not in the arts of war but in the greater arts of peace—trained not to destroy but to build up, if someone will give you a job.

I propose, therefore, to create an army to be known as the army of construction. You'll be enlisted subject to military discipline. You'll receive army rates of pay. You'll be fed, clothed and housed as we did our wartime army. You'll be put to work, each one of you in your own field, from baking loaves of bread to building great dams, without one dollar of profit accruing to anyone.

Then, as the wheels of industry begin to turn, stimulated by these efforts, you will gradually be retired from this construction army back into private industry as rapidly as industry can absorb you.

Not only oratory is used to invoke Lincoln; a considerable portion of the film's imagery tries to associate Hammond with the Civil War president. It is most noticeable in the effort to portray Hammond as the emancipator of the millions of unemployed. On the eve of his address to Congress he sees a vision of the jobless veterans standing at the White House gates and softly singing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The camera tracks slowly toward a bust of Lincoln in the Oval Office.

Congress is largely unimpressed with Hammond's apparent assumption of a divine right to rule, and there are cries for his impeachment just before he enters the chamber. But Hammond, steadfast, minces no words, progressing from homely metaphor to strident threats in a determined effort to impose his will:

A plant cannot be made to grow by watering the top alone and letting the roots go dry. The people of this country are the roots of the nation, and the spirit its trunk and the branches too.

You have spent four billion dollars only to aggravate adversity. I ask for four billion dollars to restore buying power, stimulate purchases, restore prosperity.

You have wasted precious days and weeks and years in futile discussion. We need action—immediate and effective action. . . .

I ask you gentlemen to declare a state of national emergency, and to adjourn this Congress until normal conditions are restored. During this period of adjournment, I shall assume full responsibility for the government.¹⁸

SENATOR

Mr. President, this is dictatorship!

HAMMOND

Senator Langham, words do not frighten me.

SENATOR

But the United States of America is a democracy. We are not yet ready to give up the government of our past.

HAMMOND

You have given it up. You've turned your backs. You've closed your ears to the appeals of the people. You've been traitorous to the concepts of democracy upon which this government was founded.

I believe in democracy as Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln believed in democracy, and if what I plan to do in the name of the people makes me a dictator, then it is a dictatorship based on Jefferson's definition of democracy—a government for the greatest good of the greatest number.

A VOICE

This Congress refuses to adjourn!

HAMMOND

I think, gentlemen, you forget that I am still the President of these United States, and as commander-in-chief of the Army and Navy it is within the rights of the President to declare the country under martial law!

There is an outraged cry, but the next shot is of a newspaper headline: "CONGRESS ACCEDES TO PRESIDENT'S REQUEST: Adjourns By Overwhelming Vote—Hammond Dictator."

Zealously attacking the country's problems, Hammond fights organized crime with a ruthlessly efficient national police force, urges reorganization of the banking system, and, in a visually dramatic speech to foreign diplomats aboard an American ship in the Atlantic, exhorts America's allies to pay their war debts and to voluntarily disarm. Eventually he arranges an

¹⁸ This passage might be compared with Franklin Roosevelt's calm remark at the end of his first inaugural address, in which he offered to do much of the work of governing by executive order.

international peace conference which ratifies the "Washington Covenant" on arms control, then dies a martyr to peace. The film closes with a mournful crowd watching the White House flag being lowered to half-staff.

4

There are a number of significant differences between the film's version of *Gabriel over the White House* and the novel. Tweed's prose style is brisk, journalistic, and businesslike, relying heavily on the popular writer's characteristic strategy of explaining events and motivations rather than letting them emerge from the story by themselves. He does provide a more flesh-and-blood Judson Hammond, however. A former Republican from Milwaukee, he is elected governor and senator before winning the presidency under the banner of the National Party, a coalition of conservative factions of old Democrats and Republicans that opposes the Progressive Party, comprising "dissenters, reformers and radicals." The National Party advocates noninvolvement in European affairs and an independent United States.

The unemployed veterans in the book, called "squatters," are less restrained than those in the film. When local authorities refuse to feed them they resort to robbery, and the National Guard is occasionally summoned to protect property. The Gabriel-inspired Hammond does not meet them in Baltimore in the book, but instead outlines his relief programs in a businesslike White House meeting. His sympathy with the veterans is indisputable, however (he was on General Pershing's staff in World War I), and takes unusual form. When Chicago gangsters attack some veterans, Hammond secretly finances a popular Hollywood film that takes the side of the "squatters" and appeals to public sentiment and patriotism. In it Bronson dies wrapped in the flag.

Tweed's president is more politically active and aggressive as well. He packs the U.S. Supreme Court with six additional justices (supposedly to reduce its workload),¹⁹ and labors tirelessly to extend his power, pressing Congress for authority to raise each federal appropriation 20 percent whenever the lawmakers are not in session. To keep state governments in check, he stations federal representatives in each state capital with a hand on the federal purse strings. In case state objections persist, he is to stop all federal funds, and if open rebellion occurs, he is prepared to declare martial law.

Public relations are also more important to the book's Hammond. He establishes a Department of Education which primarily "educates" the public about the rightness of presidential policies; he appeals directly to the public on elaborate nationwide television hookups (going well beyond the scope of Roosevelt's celebrated fireside chats), and bypasses attempts to sabotage the televised addresses by having reprints of his speeches airdropped to the people. Why the novel's Hammond needs to resort to such extraordinary

¹⁹ Franklin Roosevelt's proposal to pack the Supreme Court with six additional justices was offered to Congress in 1937.

measures to insure public trust when he is endowed with such official powers is not explained.

Tweed writes repeatedly that his president is generally revered, but there are some infidels who doubt his sanity. The White House doctor, the vice-president, and former secretary of state Brooks plot to ease Hammond out of office and into a sanitarium, but Hammond discovers the ruse and handles the situation adroitly. Imposing a selective cover-up, he publicly reveals the names of the civilian plotters while keeping those of the federal officials secret. "Let the country laugh its head off," he tells an aide.

As in the film, federal police swarm down on gangsters, but their methods are somewhat more just, if not less efficient—the criminals are at least tried by judges rather than by the police themselves. More ominous, considering the real world's political climate in 1933, is Tweed's open admiration for the elite group of motorcycle-borne, paramilitary marksmen called "Green Jackets" for their uniforms' color. Their only job is to search for contraband firearms, but they step outside the law when the need arises, raiding gangsters' homes without warrants.

The peace covenant in the novel is signed in London rather than Washington, and Hammond wins the day not by a show of military might but by eloquence and logic. Encouraged by his triumph, he moves toward further vistas of power at home, trying to amend the Constitution to allow Congress to convene only at the president's pleasure, and calling for six-year presidential terms without succession.

Nearing the end of his four years in office, Hammond is opposed for reelection by Jasper Brooks, who has by now been transformed into an outright scalawag (he calls Hammond, not implausibly, a megalomaniac). But Hammond is fired upon while visiting the British embassy by a gangster who had escaped a federal-police ambush. In the confusion, he falls on his head, and the reformed presidential persona vanishes. Here the book departs sharply from the film: the "old" Hammond now learns what actions he has taken in the past four years, and denounces most of them as "acts of treason." The Covenant of London is "a tragedy for America," and disarmament is folly. He also condemns his declaration of national emergency, his suspension of Congress, the creation of federal police, and the curtailment of states' rights. Refusing to stand for reelection, Hammond prepares to explain in a television speech to the American people. The Cabinet votes secretly to prevent his address, and the camera's "on" light is turned off as he begins to speak. Enraged, he rises, then collapses and dies.

In Hammond's repudiation, the novel closes off the world of fantasy. The implication is clear that the operation of government will return to normal; that the inspired Judson Hammond was only a briefly shining light. We are reminded that such men do not exist in the real world of politics as ordinary mortals. The film, on the other hand, refuses to disallow flights of fancy; after his collapse Hammond seems to return briefly to his old self, but takes nothing back and dies basked in ethereal light and music. His

shining armor is never tarnished by a recognition of his transgressions.

Wanger, Wilson, La Cava, and Hearst shaped the story into a form more directly aligned with the publisher's political and social beliefs than was Tweed's manuscript. The exact nature and extent of Hearst's personal involvement in determining the final version of the film remains unclear, but his role was significant and probably central. Hearst, for example, wrote the entire war-debts speech delivered by Hammond to the diplomats (and a worldwide radio audience), with the U.S. fleet cruising in the background:

The next war will be a terrible story of the terrible failure of antiquated machinery and antiquated methods and of the horrifying destructiveness of modern agencies of war. . . . Peace and faith are necessary among men, not merely for the welfare of nations but for the very existence of nations. The next war will depopulate the earth. . . .²⁰

This may contradict Hearst's previously consistent opposition to the League of Nations, but it fits completely with his personality. Hearst abhorred war, but he equally abhorred any sort of permanent international organization in which the United States could be forced to relinquish sovereignty. President Hammond's approach would avoid these kinds of "entangling alliances" by confronting the fundamental issues head-on and solving them without harmful aftereffects. The "Washington Covenant" conference was dominated by the American government in the film, and, after its close, no residual framework could restrict the United States in world affairs or draw it into wars.

The Hammond administration's war on organized crime is more difficult to reconcile with Hearst's philosophy. He was against crime but never made its eradication a supreme goal of his newspapers. It seems most likely that *Cosmopolitan* and MGM used the anticrime sequences—and Tweed put them into the novel—as vivid demonstrations of the effectiveness of an American president endowed with such dictatorial powers. There is also the undeniable attraction of the gangster genre for movie audiences of 1933.

The relationship of the chief gangster, Nick Diamond (C. Henry Gordon), to John Bronson is implausible in the film. When Bronson spurns Diamond's suggestion (accompanied by a bribe) that he keep his men in their camps—apparently to distract local police from criminal activities—a machine gun in a passing ambulance cuts down Bronson. But once President Hammond declares war on the racketeers, bootleggers, and kidnapers under a declared national emergency, the hoodlums are doomed. Their brazen defiance in spraying bullets into the White House foyer from a passing black sedan only insures their defeat. This sequence would be ludicrous except by comparison with its epilogue: national police rout the criminals from their hideouts using preposterous little motorized tanks, briskly

²⁰ Crowther reports that Carey Wilson preserved the sheets on which Hearst wrote the speech in longhand (p. 178).

dispense justice at courts-martial ("An eye for an eye, Nick Diamond, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life," intones the leader of the police force), and execute them by firing squad within sight of the Statue of Liberty.

Hearst's feelings about the unemployed are much better known. The marchers in *Gabriel over the White House* are not specifically identified, but there are many references to their wartime service. They seem obviously meant to suggest the mass of some 15,000 veterans who had marched on Washington in the spring and summer of 1932. The real veterans had not come for general unemployment relief, however; they sought to collect war bonuses they had been promised by law in 1924. The bonuses were not payable until 1945, but the veterans felt that their plight justified their impatience. Hearst agreed with them, and he was incensed when President Hoover, ostensibly acting upon request of the commissioners of the District of Columbia, ordered the War Department to evict the veterans from their makeshift dwellings after a bonus bill failed to pass the Congress in mid-summer 1932. Under the command of Army Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur, 200 mounted cavalymen and 300 foot soldiers, escorted by five tanks, drove the veterans and their families away from dilapidated federal buildings downtown. After nightfall the troops routed the remainder of the bonus marchers from Anacostia Flats, outside the city, and burned their tents and huts. There were scores of injuries, but, miraculously, no one was killed (two veterans had been killed in an earlier scuffle with district police).²¹

Furious, Hearst telegraphed the editor of the *New York American*, E. D. Coblentz:

I do not care if every paper in the United States comments favorably on Hoover's action. I think it was the most outrageous piece of stupidity, if nothing worse, that has ever been perpetrated by the Government. If the idea is to develop Bolshevism in this country, there is no better way of doing it. . . .

Mr. Hoover may explain why he ordered out the forces of government to have the veterans shot down, but no true American with gratitude in his heart for the service of the veterans will feel that such action was wholly justifiable, or that it would have been committed by a Lincoln or a Jefferson, or any of our patriotic Presidents of any party. That is the way I feel about it, and I think our editorials should temperately express that view. . . .²²

²¹ The march and its implications are discussed in two book-length studies: Roger Daniels' *The Bonus March: An Episode of the Great Depression* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971), and a much more thorough examination, Donald J. Lisio's *The President and Protest: Hoover, Conspiracy and the Bonus Riot* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1974).

²² Quoted in Mrs. Fremont Older, *William Randolph Hearst, American* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1936), p. 520. Hearst was uninformed on several points. Hoover, it is now clear, ordered MacArthur to use a minimum of force, and no veterans were "shot down" by federal troops. It is also generally agreed that MacArthur exceeded his orders by pursuing the veterans outside the District of Columbia.

Hearst's Washington *Times*, however, received no such telegram, or its editors would not have reacted in print as they did the next day. The *Times*' long lead editorial of July 29, 1932, justified the intervention on the grounds that "radical elements" among the marchers had forced "an open conflict with the regular Army." The use of force was "regrettable," the *Times* concluded, but unavoidable:

The time always comes when the majority must express itself forcibly to repulse attacks by a predatory minority.

Most other non-Hearst papers expressed equally strong support for Hoover in the days immediately following. But as the 1932 presidential campaign grew hotter, the Bonus March incident was turned against the incumbent by many papers—especially those in the Hearst chain—and Hoover was vilified for his decision almost until his death.²³

Seen in this light, Cosmopolitan Productions' treatment of the veterans' unemployment issue in *Gabriel over the White House* is curious indeed. The film's marchers are fairly well dressed, orderly, and polite. Unlike the real veterans, they do not build embarrassing unsightly hovels. They do not occupy Washington to press their demands, but are stopped in Baltimore by the sheer rhetorical power of President Hammond. Perhaps most important, they are not demanding money, but jobs. It was the immediate payment of the bonus that Hoover fought in 1932, arguing that the federal budget could not tolerate it. The real issue was clear-cut and open to debate. As presented in the film, it is couched in broader, less controversial terms. With a wave of his hand, Hammond easily promises to organize a "construction army" to put them to work and restore prosperity.

5

The most provocative and revealing issue raised by the film is its unapologetic call for a strongly authoritarian president in time of national crisis. Critics of Hearst, from the 1930s to the present, have condemned the elements of fascism in his political thought. In retrospect, his prescriptions do not seem to have constituted fascism of the classic variety—Hearst was a firm believer in free enterprise, and he would not sanction suppression of opposition, whether by censorship or force of arms. But he certainly wanted a strong presidency, and believed he had found a suitable candidate in Franklin Roosevelt, whom he helped nominate in 1932.²⁴

²³ A conclusion from my unpublished study, "The Bonus March and the American Press," The University of Iowa, April, 1973, based partly on materials at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

²⁴ Most historians and biographers credit Hearst with providing the crucial swing votes to Roosevelt at the 1932 Democratic National Convention after Hearst realized that his first choice, Speaker John Nance Garner of Texas, could not win the nomination. See Leuchtenberg, pp. 6-8; W. A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst* (New York: Scribner's, 1961), pp. 435-38.

No one has seriously questioned Hearst's steadfast anticommunism, and there is some indication that he saw fascism as the lesser of the two evils and perhaps even as a bulwark against communism.²⁵ Leftist writers of the 1930s perceived a warmer embrace, however; they cited Hearst's un concealed admiration for Benito Mussolini, his opposition to the Newspaper Guild and the NRA, his virtual dictatorship of his own empire, and his visit to Adolf Hitler in 1934.²⁶ Raymond Gram Swing wrote in *Forerunners of American Fascism* that Hearst may have been espousing fascism without being aware of it, and this argument seems persuasive.²⁷ But when pressed directly, Hearst came down hard against fascism. "Fascism seems to be spreading over here," he wrote one of his editors from Europe. "We have got to keep crazy isms out of our country. . . . Both [fascism and communism] are despotisms and deprive people of the liberties which democracy assures."²⁸

If not quite an authentic fascist, Hearst was certainly a dyed-in-the-wool nationalist. He believed devoutly in the traditional American political ethos and rarely overlooked an opportunity to proclaim democracy to be the finest political system devised by man. In the process, he usually contrasted democracy to dictatorship, and his comments in this regard provide a strong contrast with the implicit ideology and imagery of *Gabriel over the White House*. Democracy, Hearst wrote (a decade before the film):

does not mean supplanting the will of the people by the dictatorship of some arrogant class or clique or the despotism of some vainglorious individual. . . .

It does not mean the substitution of imperious divine right for popular constitutional government.²⁹

The visitation of Gabriel was, if anything, a sign that Judson Hammond indeed had a divine right to suspend normal constitutional procedure. Only a month after *Gabriel over the White House* opened in April, 1933 in New York, Hearst expressed dismay at the acquiescence of Congress to President Roosevelt, who by then was well into his first hundred days of furious legislative activity:

Constitutional methods are ample to meet any situation. . . .

The only reason for Congress to confer any of its constitutional powers

²⁵ See, for example, Swanberg, p. 446.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 444-45. Ferdinand Lundberg, in *Imperial Hearst: A Social Biography* (New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1936), cited Hearst's provision of two news services to Hitler as evidence that Hearst was allowing Nazi "spying" on the United States, p. 354.

²⁷ Raymond Gram Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism* (n.p.: Julian Messner, 1935), p. 145.

²⁸ Swanberg, p. 446.

²⁹ Quoted in E. F. Tompkins, ed., *Selections From the Writings and Speeches of William Randolph Hearst* (San Francisco: privately published, 1948), pp. 227-28.

upon the Executive is to give him the opportunity to perform arbitrarily and perhaps secretly acts which the Congress itself should perform constitutionally and publicly.³⁰

Such dicta, of course, would leave little legal leeway for the sweeping assumption of authority by Judson Hammond, and *The Christian Century* could not resist pointing out the contradiction in an editorial:

Gabriel at the White House, according to Mr. Hearst, meant an executive with a free hand and a bold tongue. But just at that time a President actually did cut himself loose from many of his campaign obligations (including those to Mr. Hearst); who did come closer than any of his peacetime predecessors to seizing dictatorial powers. . . . We hate to think what might happen to Gabriel if Mr. Hearst could get his hands on him now!³¹

Unaffected by such criticism, Hearst continued to attack Roosevelt's unprecedented aggregation of presidential power. This was not the first nor last example of the publisher's lack of consistency—a virtue that he regarded as irrelevant. Accomplishment, he liked to say, was far more important than avoiding contradiction:

I always feel that it is not as important to be consistent as it is to be correct. A man who is completely consistent never learns anything. Conditions change, and he does not.³²

Hearst lived up to his maxim, and perhaps the turning point in his gradual transformation from “radicalism to extreme conservatism”³³ occurred soon after Roosevelt took office. Hearst interpreted the president's comparatively strenuous activity in international affairs as a repudiation of the candidate's assurance that he would not thrust the nation into “entangling alliances” (a phrase coined by Hearst). Hearst could see in Roosevelt many of the same dangers he recalled seeing in Woodrow Wilson:

I recognized that this brilliant, pedantic, inexperienced college professor could become a menace to our country. I saw that a combination of events . . . plus the man's evident self-hypnosis and the massive grandeur of his office . . . could cause Wilson to lead the country into catastrophe.³⁴

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 238-39. From an editorial run in Hearst newspapers May 11, 1933.

³¹ “Gabriel Toots Too Soon,” *The Christian Century*, vol. 50, no. 19 (May 10, 1933), p. 613. Roosevelt, Crowther reports, liked the film enough to watch it several times in the White House, p. 180.

³² Quoted in John K. Winkler, *William Randolph Hearst: A New Appraisal* (New York: Hastings House, 1955), p. 4.

³³ *Ibid.* Charles Foster Kane, of course, became noticeably less liberal with age in *Citizen Kane*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Yet Hearst seems to have been blind to these dangers in his fictional president, Judson Hammond.

6

Gabriel over the White House received a mixed reaction from the nation's periodical press. Some journals were aghast at what they perceived the film's message to be, while others were less shocked. But almost every writer recognized the film's historical significance. Even *The Nation*, which vehemently denounced the film for trying to "convert innocent American movie audiences to a policy of fascist dictatorship in this country," conceded that it marked "the first attempt by Hollywood producers to exploit the current popular interest in social and economic ideas. . . . Now for the first time Hollywood openly accepts the depression as a fact."³⁵ Richard Dana Skinner of *Commonweal* saw another reason for its importance:

It sets a precedent. It opens up, for good or for evil, a new channel of influencing the mass emotions and judgment of a people. . . . We know now that a most dangerous weapon of propaganda can be forged.³⁶

It is curious, and regrettable, that *Gabriel over the White House* has almost been lost in American film history. Lewis Jacobs discusses it more than most historians, but he is disappointingly brief and vague: "This film, in pointing out the advantages of a dictatorship or a similar form of rule, was significant, coming at a time when conditions were critical."³⁷ Most recent histories analyze it even less, or not at all.³⁸ Only Andrew Bergman has given the film its due, in *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films*, making an effort to place the film in its social and cultural context.³⁹ *Gabriel* is barely mentioned in most biographies of Hearst, presumably because it came to be an embarrassment during his anti-Roosevelt period.

What seems most remarkable (and worthy of historical mention) today about *Gabriel over the White House* is the naturalness with which an ag-

³⁵ "Fascism Over Hollywood," *The Nation*, vol. 136, no. 3538 (Apr. 26, 1933), pp. 482-83.

³⁶ "Gabriel over the White House," *Commonweal*, vol. 18, no. 1 (May 5, 1933), p. 20.

³⁷ *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1939), p. 516.

³⁸ See, for instance, the absence of treatment in Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1971), in John Baxter, *Hollywood in the Thirties* (New York: Barnes, 1968), and in Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975).

³⁹ Bergman's book, begun as a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Wisconsin and supported by a grant from the American Film Institute, was published by New York University Press in 1971 (and later in paperback by Harper & Row).

gressively dictatorial president assumes almost absolute control over the nation. To accept this premise—and the rest of the film—uncritically requires a considerable exercise of imagination, but the political segments are often credible, especially when considered against the background of the early 1930s. Walter Huston portrays Hammond with skill and conviction. After the conversion, he is a dynamic and charismatic leader even if we reject the suggestions of divine intervention. Hammond's arguments before Congress seem persuasive; it was indisputable in early 1933 that the real Congress indeed had "wasted precious days and weeks and years in futile discussion," as Hammond reminds the fictional legislators. We tend to react sympathetically, perhaps especially in the 1970s, to the observation of his secretary: "If he's mad, it's a divine madness. Look at the chaos and catastrophe the sane men of this world have brought about."

Despite his alarming faults and despite the awesome dangers posed to constitutional law and personal liberty, President Hammond did act, forthrightly and decisively. He seized power, but with an impressive clarity of vision and a disarming openness of purpose. After three years of drifting deeper into despair and paralysis, American audiences must have been heartened by the prospect of a president who would take action. That may account for the film's immediate popularity; it was among the six most popular films in April, 1933, the month it was released.⁴⁰

For Hearst, the film was an unparalleled opportunity to convey his beliefs graphically and dramatically to the public, and with some protective artistic license. His satisfaction in accomplishing that goal surely outweighed his later embarrassment and frustration in watching Franklin Roosevelt do most of the things he had advocated but in ways abhorrent to Hearst's tastes. What Hearst had tried to present in *Gabriel over the White House* was his simple—perhaps simplistic—faith that a well-meaning and clear-thinking president, another Jefferson, Jackson, or Lincoln, could lead the country out of economic and psychological depression. His candidate, to be sure, was a unique individual: a man invincible in strength but righteous in heart, a gentle giant who would pick the country up, pat it reassuringly on the back, and reset it deftly on the path to recovery. Hearst, in *Gabriel*, was not calling for an overhaul of the system or even a reexamination of our goals. Those, to him, were already the best in the world. Only the right kind of leadership was lacking, as he saw it. Install the right man in the White House (or convert him), and the resulting progress, prosperity, and peace would come almost automatically. There was no sadness at the death of Judson Hammond because his mission had been accomplished. Having put us back on the right track, he was no longer needed. The film is Utopian in its assumption that there are inherently good candidates for the presidency, or at least that God will unfailingly send His Archangel to convert them.

⁴⁰ Bergman, p. 118.

While not a cinematic milestone, *Gabriel over the White House* remains a singularly remarkable film, important for what it suggests about the mood of America in the darkest days of the depression, and for what it reveals about William Randolph Hearst, one of the most influential figures in American life throughout most of his career. There is some indication that Tweed might have intended his novel to be a satire,⁴¹ but Hearst, as usual, was dead serious about politics. He did not want audiences to snicker when the invisible presence of Gabriel ruffled the Oval Office curtains, or when trumpet and harp suffused the conversion of Judson Hammond. Although Gregory La Cava, whose most notable films were comedies, managed to include some subtly amusing sequences, *Gabriel's* main messages are undiluted by humor. *Literary Digest* speculated that "perhaps Hollywood has taken a satire [the novel] too seriously,"⁴² but there is no reason to suspect that Hearst ever regarded the story as anything except a timely lesson of immense value to the American people.

⁴¹ "Flag Waves Smartly O'er 'Gabriel in White House,'" *Newsweek*, vol. 1, no. 8 (Apr. 8, 1933), p. 25.

⁴² "A President After Hollywood's Hearst," *Literary Digest*, vol. 115, no. 16 (Apr. 22, 1933), p. 13.