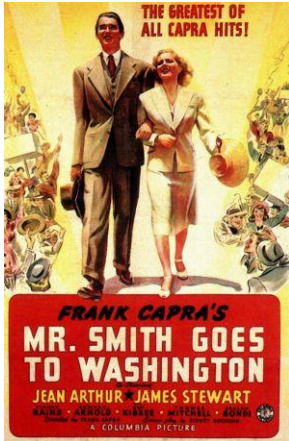


# Movie Kit



American  
Spaces

## *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*



**Director:** Frank Capra

**Year of Release:** 1939

**Starring:** James Stewart, Jean Arthur

**Rating:** PG

**Length:** 2h 9min

**English level:** Medium

**Themes:** Democratic Process and Values, Rule of Law

### Warning/General Advisory

This film is acceptable for audiences of all ages.

*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is a comedy-drama about an idealistic man who is appointed to a seat in the United States Senate, as a replacement for a recently deceased Senator. Seeking to do what he thinks is best and right for the people, Jefferson Smith finds himself confronted with a system where self-interest and political corruption is common. Directed by Frank Capra and starring James Stewart, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington's* message is as important today as it was when it was released nearly eighty years ago – that decency and honesty are important and that a single person can make a difference.

### Context

*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was released in 1939 near the end of Hollywood's "Golden Age." Also released that year were two hugely successful films, *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Elsewhere, 1939 was not such a good year. The world's economy was still gripped in the Great Depression. It was also the year that saw the beginning of World War II with the Nazi invasion of Poland in September.

Upon its release, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was criticized by some in the news media and Congress as being anti-American for its portrayal of corrupt legislators and a news media that was frequently more interested in selling papers than telling the truth. When the movie was previewed in October 1939 at Washington's Constitution Hall, it is reported that among the 4,000+ audience members, some politicians were so offended by how they were being portrayed in the film, that they started yelling at the movie screen. Other offended people walked out of the movie screening. One U.S. Ambassador commented that showing this film to foreign audiences will harm foreign public opinion of the United States.

There was also widespread praise for this film, particularly in showing democratic ideals. Today, this film is a classic in American history and culture. It is considered timeless and universal -- as one film commentator notes, there are no Democrats or Republicans in the film, and no "right" or "wrong" party, because that would limit the influence of the movie. In addition,

there are no references to the Depression or World War II, which would have dated the film. In the movie, Mr. Smith is appointed to the Senate after the seat's incumbent dies, and he arrives in Washington totally unaware of the unscrupulous actions of some of his new congressional colleagues. In refusing to become corrupt himself, Mr. Smith stands on the principles the United States was founded upon. In doing so, he represents the good in all of us who believe in values larger than ourselves.

### Key Vocabulary/Places

- **Senator** – a politician and elected member of the Senate. The Senate is one of two “houses” in Congress. Senators serve for six year terms and focus on legislation. Senators are also called “Congressmen.”
- **Filibuster**– an action of prolonged speech that prevents progress in a legislative (or law-making) assembly.
- **Bill**- a draft of a proposed law presented to a legislature, but not yet enacted or made into law.
- **Political Machine** – a political organization that influences votes on its behalf by passing out rewards and favors.
- **Political Boss** – a leader in a political party who controls votes and dictates appointments, even though this person might not hold political office.
- **Graft** – illegal use of political influence for personal gain; this is a form of political corruption.

### Other Key Characters

- **Senator Joseph Paine** – the other Senator from Mr. Smith's state. Serves as a mentor to Mr. Smith, but he is secretly crooked and generally controlled by corrupt political forces.
- **Jim Taylor** – a very rich, powerful, and corrupt businessman who runs a “political machine,” through which he controls many politicians, newspapers, and big businesses in his state.
- **Clarissa Saunders** – a secretary in Senator Paine's office who helps Mr. Smith get used to political life in Washington DC.

### Discussion Questions

- Why does Governor Hopper appoint Jefferson Smith to the Senate?
- Why are the people of the state so happy that Mr. Smith has become Senator? How would you describe Mr. Smith?
- Why did Mr. Smith present a bill? What conflicts arise regarding this bill?
- What transformation does Clarissa Saunders have over the course of the movie?
- Could Mr. Smith have triumphed without the help of Clarissa Saunders?
- Mr. Smith discusses liberty, and says “*Liberty is too precious a thing to be buried in books. People should hold it up in front of them every single day of their lives and say – ‘I am free to think and to speak. My ancestors couldn’t. I can and my children will.’*” What does liberty mean to you?
- Franklin Roosevelt was the President of the United States when *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was released. In his *Four Freedoms* speech, delivered less than a year before America's entry into World War II, President Roosevelt presented the freedoms he believed were essential to liberty. They were: **Freedom of Speech - Freedom of Worship – Freedom From Want and Freedom From Fear**. What are your thoughts about these freedoms?