WASHINGTON IN THE MOVIES

Your education in the ways of Washington should include what you can learn from the movies, as well as from books (that’s for another list), journalism, experts, friends and your own personal explorations on WPNI.

Not surprisingly, the nation’s capital has served as backdrop for many movies over the years, perhaps second only to New York. In all of them you get a sense of the key place that Washington plays in the life of the country: its history, politics and culture.

Herein my picks for the best of the movies that include Washington as a part of the scenery and story:

"Advise and Consent"
Otto Preminger's flick stoked controversy in 1962 by exploring back-room dealing and dirty laundry (a homosexual affair). These days, it's a reminder of the McCarthy era and the talent of Charles Laughton. It’s worth it just to see the great British actor playing a southern Senator who lays the accent and hick-shtick on thick. The plot revolves around the Senate confirmation of a candidate (Henry Fonda) for Secretary of State, and it is an education in the messy process and its attendant politics. It’s instructive to see DC in the early 1960s and compare it to present-day reality: Senate rivals actually talking civilly to each other and even playing cards together into the night, for example. Incredible!

“All the President’s Men”
Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman star as the Woodward/Bernstein duo of Washington Post reporters who investigate Watergate from a “third-rate burglary” to the crimes and cover-ups that brought down the Nixon presidency. Nominated for 8 Oscars in 1976, including Best Picture. Directed by Alan Pakula and filmed almost entirely in Washington, the city becomes more than simple backdrop, but assume another character in the movie: large, imposing federal buildings that seem to dwarf the insignificant reporters, dark parking lots and the light of Washington Post newsroom, and so on. One of the best depictions of investigative political journalism in all its grubbiness and glory.

“Breach”
Based on the true story of Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent convicted of spying for the Soviet Union and later Russia for twenty years. Starring Chris Cooper, the 2007 film is at times suspenseful, but mostly an interesting psychological study of a deviant who leads a normal life on the surface but who is anything but normal in reality, among other things selling out his country for money. Many scenes of Washington appear in the background as the action takes place from downtown to the Northern Virginia suburbs where some of the deaddrops of information for money take place. (Hanssen actually used the computers in the Falls Church library to gather information surreptitiously.)

“Charlie Wilson’s War”
A sharp-edged political comedy of 2007 directed by Mike Nichols and written by Aaron ("The West Wing" – also worth checking out for DC scenes) Sorkin that knowingly dissects the Washington political scene. Based on true events from the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s in the depths of the Cold War. Tom Hanks stars as Charlie Wilson, a liberal Democratic Congressman from Texas who -- even though it is far afield of his 2nd Texas Congressional district -- becomes concerned about the Soviet invasion and much to his and everyone else’s surprise, takes the lead role in bringing the occupation to an end. He does this in his capacity as member of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee and swinging authorization to supply the mujahedeen with Stinger missiles. And with the help of a rogue CIA agent of course, played by Phillip Seymour Hoffman in an Oscar-nominated role. One of the best films for a behind-the-scenes look at the workings of Congress -- from the offices to committee chambers -- and the deals and counter-deals made there. Wait for the final scene, which foretells much of the reasons why we are still dealing with Afghanistan now.

"Dr. Strangelove"
Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 classic spoofs a crazy general who runs roughshod over a room full of frantic politicians trying to keep him from the button. No other movie has quite captured the savage fun of nuclear annihilation, nor could be so revealing of Cold War Washington and its fears and loathings.

“The Exorcist”
William Friedkin’s tour de force of a horror pic probably won’t have the same effect on young audiences of today as it had when it came out in 1973 (folks actually had to leave the theater then, freaked out – hard to imagine that nowadays). But it is a very well-made film in its genre – well directed, well written, well acted --- and it all takes place in the leafy confines of Georgetown, a rarity in film. This is strange, because Georgetown has figured so prominently in American political history and is a beautiful place. But maybe there will be others in the future. Until then, it is “The Exorcist”. You can still go to see and take your picture next to the steep outdoor steps (across from the Key Bridge) where the climactic scene takes place. I won’t tell you what happens, would spoil the fun.

“In the Line of Fire”
Smart, tense and action-packed thriller about a veteran Secret Service agent (Clint Eastwood) who is trying to stop an assassin (John Malkovich in one of the creepiest villain roles on film), while also dealing with his own demons for his failure to prevent the assassination of JFK in 1963. More than a simple thriller, though, the movie is a nice look at the life of a Secret Service agent, with scenes of the White House, Air Force One and familiar sights around DC.

“Mr. Smith Goes to Washington”
Don’t let the dippy title fool you: this is a genuine classic. Starring Jimmy Stewart as Jefferson Smith, a naïve and well-meaning Boy Scout leader who gets appointed to fill a Senate seat, and then gets caught up in the intrigues of Senate politics and eventually stands alone against corruption and graft. Filmed entirely in Washington and especially against the backdrop of the monuments, which play a prominent role in the storyline (notice how the Lincoln memorial plays a key scene). Director Frank Capra’s paean to American democracy appeared in 1939, when World War II was beginning, reminding Americans and the rest of the world that the fight was
worth it. Nominated for 10 Academy Awards, winning one for Best Screenplay. (Why didn’t it win Best Picture? Well, 1939 was a pretty good year for films: Gone with the Wind, The Wizard of Oz, Wuthering Heights, etc.)

“National Treasure”
A fun fantasy that is in reality a vehicle for Nicolas Cage to run around Washington, finding clues that lead to a treasure. To show how improbable a plot can get, one of the clues is on the back of the Declaration of Independence. Oh well, it means he has to break into the National Archives to get it, so we can see more of one of our favorite DC buildings. And, if this is your cup of tea, be sure and catch “National Treasure 2 - Book of Secrets” in which he races around another of our favorite buildings, the Library of Congress.

“No Way Out”
A taut, very well-made thriller starring a young Kevin Costner (it was made in 1987, so one of his first roles) as a Navy officer assigned to the Secretary of Defense (Gene Hackman), who eventually reveals himself as a killer. Washington is again the backdrop as the action moves around the city. Even the chase scenes are well-done, including a good one that involves emptying the entire Pentagon.

“Thank You For Smoking”
An elegant and savage 2006 satire of the Washington lobby industry. If it’s directed by Jason Reitman and from a book by Christopher Buckley, you know it’s got to be good, and it is. Aaron Eckhart stars as a lobbyist for the tobacco industry who tools around DC and in the process introduces us to a variety of players and situations. With an wry insider’s narrative, this results in a grad-level education in lobbying practices. Example: his weekly lunch with pals from the alcohol and firearms industries who call themselves the MOD Squad (Merchants of Death).

"Thirteen Days"
A million war films and only a single film about diplomacy? Yep, this 2000 look at the Cuban Missile Crisis is a rarity -- a taut, honest look at behind-the-scenes Cold War diplomacy during one of its most intense periods, when the possibility of nuclear war was all but inevitable. How a nuclear holocaust was avoided finally is a tribute to diplomacy, but a little trickery made sure the stand down happened. Sobering. Lots of interesting scenes of DC and the White House in the early 1960s.

"Wag the Dog"
A president concocts a war to turn attention away from a sex scandal? Could that actually happen? Maybe so -- but the acting in the 1998 movie with Dustin Hoffman and Robert DeNiro is better.

Those are my favorite Washington movies. What are yours? What did I miss? Let me know.