

Candidates and moviegoers: A hidden danger

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

Republican and Democratic candidates who survive the February 5 delegate nomination marathon should be ready to confront a hidden danger to their campaigns—movies. Hillary Clinton, for example, should be concerned about *Primary Colors* (1998), a thinly disguised portrait of her and Bill. Based on a book by Joe Klein, the film follows the early career of fictional candidate Governor Jack Stanton (John Travolta) and his wife, Susan (Emma Thompson).

Late in the film campaign adviser Libby Holden (Kathy Bates) confronts the couple with her research on charges about the candidate's sexual escapades—not a part of history the Clintons want voters to remember. Holden reminds the Stantons that they were once idealists; in their quest for power they have abandoned their idealism. The governor's wife defends the shift, saying they must do what is needed to reach the White House—where they will then act on their ideals.

The film that could haunt former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, a Mormon, is *September Dawn*. Released late in 2006, *September Dawn* tells the story of the massacre of 140 Methodist pioneers on September 11, 1857, in Mountain Meadows, Utah. Only one Mormon leader was executed for the crime, but historical consensus maintains that other Mormon officials were behind the massacre.

Of course, Romney cannot be held responsible for what happened at Mountain Meadows. But because Mormonism is an unknown quantity to many American voters, the film could undermine his efforts to explain that Mormonism today is not the Mormonism of 1857. Unfortunately for Romney, a political campaign is not a good venue for teaching the public about religious belief and history.

Critics are hailing *The Great Debaters*, directed by and starring Denzel Washington, as a tribute to the struggle against segregation by African Americans in the South. This celebration of an African-American college debate team's victory over prejudice could have both negative and positive value for Barack Obama. On the negative

side, the film might remind African-American voters that Obama was not a part of the civil rights movement. But that fact might be regarded favorably by others.

Some Democratic candidates have been so eager to portray themselves as tough on terror that they have ignored the strong human rights concerns of their liberal base. Recently that base was disappointed by the weak effort the Democrats made to block the nomination of federal judge Michael Mukasey as U.S. attorney general. Two liberal Democratic senators, Dianne Feinstein of California and Charles Schumer of New York, cast decisive votes for Mukasey in spite of his refusal to declare that he considered waterboarding to be torture.

The 2007 film *Rendition* puts the focus on this issue by depicting—in graphic detail—the torture of an American-Egyptian citizen. (The story is based on an actual case.) When an aide tells the CIA chief (Meryl Streep) that there is insufficient evidence against Anwar El-Ibrahimi (Omar Metwally) to hold him in an American prison, she pauses for only a second before saying, “Put him on the plane.” El-Ibrahimi is “rendered” to a country where torture is routinely practiced—the U.S. outsources the torture of an American citizen.

The CIA agent assigned to monitor the torture is horrified at what he sees. He whispers to El-Ibrahim, “Just give them some names.” The tortured man writes a list of names that is later revealed to be names from a championship soccer team from El-Ibrahim’s youth. The torturer accepts the names, not knowing much about Egyptian soccer. Before slipping El-Ibrahim out of the country the CIA agent shouts at the torturer:

In all the years you’ve been doing this, how often can you say that we’ve produced truly legitimate intelligence? Once? Twice? Ten times? Give me a statistic; give me a number. Give me a pie chart, I love pie charts. Anything, anything that outweighs the fact that if you torture one person you create ten, a hundred, a thousand new enemies.

A viewing of the 1961 film *Judgment at Nuremberg* would warn us all that there are consequences for violating human rights. German judge Ernst Janning (Burt Lancaster) says, “Why did we [Germans] sit silent? Why did we take part? Because we loved our country! What difference does it make if a few political extremists lose their rights? What difference does it make if a few racial minorities lose their rights? It is only a passing phase.”