

# [***Essential President's Day Movies and TV Shows to Watch***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BBN-9KW1-JBR6-92HM-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Newsweek's H. Alan Scott breaks down the essential movies and TV shows to watch this President's Day.

**Body**

As a culture writer, I love a holiday because it gives me an opportunity to tell people about my favorites movies and TV shows that relate to that holiday. But when you think of holiday entertainment, your mind probably goes to Christmas or Halloween. What about President's Day? Well, it just so happens to be one of my favorite holidays for entertainment, because literally some of my favorite things to watch involve presidents. (I know, I need to get out more.) Anyway, in honor of the holiday, I figured I'd offer up some of my favorite movies and TV shows involving presidents. Please note, I'm only including fictional or dramatized depictions of presidents, not documentaries. (But if you want a documentary, you can't go wrong with [*PBS*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/pbs?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)' American Experience president series, and *The War Room* is a classic.)

For more, subscribe to [*For the Culture newsletter*](https://www.newsweek.com/newsletter/the-culture/?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and the [*Parting Shot podcast*](https://www.newsweek.com/podcasts/the-parting-shot?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships).

***Air Force One***

If there is one movie about a president you watch this weekend, make it *Air Force One*. The combo of Harrison [*Ford*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/ford?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) as the president and Glenn Close as the vice president, insert brain exploding emoji here. The plot is simple: a group of terrorists take control of Air Force One, and it's up to the president on board to stop them. When I [*interviewed Gary Oldman*](https://www.newsweek.com/2024/01/12/gary-oldman-what-makes-apple-tvs-slow-horses-uniquely-british-1854735.html?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), who played the terrorist, I told him how much I enjoyed the film and he mentioned it's one of his films he sees often because, "it's always on cable." And you know what? We're grateful for it. When it gets to that point of the film, remember to yell out, "Get off my plane."

***The West Wing***

For many politicos (mostly liberals), [*NBC*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/nbc?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s *The West Wing* is like a little hug from a donkey. (Get it? Because the [*Democrats*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/democrats?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) symbol is a donkey. Listen, I'm not political, I'm just trying to be funny here.) But for real, *The West Wing* is legit great. It's hopeful, suspenseful, and just amazing writing. Created by Aaron Sorkin, *The West Wing* won a ton of Emmys and inspired a slew of young people to work in ***politics***.

***Veep***

The history books will point to [*HBO*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/hbo?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s *Veep* as one of the best and funniest shows in the history of television. Julia Louis-Dreyfus' performance as Selina Kyle hits every note. The character goes from vice president to president to failed presidential candidate, and you see every aspect of ***politics*** in the worst–and hilarious—kind of ways. The sad part about it is that while the series Veep is meant to be funny, often times you can watch it and see examples of real-life politicians, which just makes for a meta viewing experience.

***The American President***

A romantic comedy for adults about a president? Yes, please! And Michael Douglas plays the president? Double yes, please! This gem, directed by Rob Reiner and written by Aaron Sorkin, has a full on Frank Capra feel to it. It's old school Hollywood love story, but set in the White House. And the dynamics between Douglas and Annette Bening are just perfect. I recently [*spoke with Reiner*](https://www.newsweek.com/2024/02/23/rob-reiner-sounds-alarm-rise-christian-nationalism-1869693.html?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), and he said about the film that while "it may not be exactly how it is," it's still a story that helps you "aspire" to level of presidential greatness.

***Deep Impact***

OK, I know what you're thinking, what does a movie about a comet heading towards earth have to do with presidents? Well, it features many amazing moments with fictional President Beck (played by Morgan Freeman) basically telling people in a presidential address, "Uh, you're all gonna die." This is one I watch monthly.

***Lincoln***

I've only included three presidential biopics on this list, and Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* had to be one of them. Arguably our greatest American president met his match with arguably our greatest living actor, Daniel Day-Lewis, who brought the 16th president to life in an eerily real way. It earned the actor his third Oscar and basically cemented his place in history as one of the best performances ever captured on film. You're not watching Daniel Day-Lewis, you're watching Abraham Lincoln.

***Dave***

This is another presidential romantic comedy, but it's more silly than *The American President*. Oscar-winner Kevin Kline plays Dave, a man who looks exactly like the sitting president and is recruited to be a stand-in during an emergency. Of course, things don't go as planned and oops, he falls in love with the first lady (played by Sigourney Weaver). This one is just a fun ride.

***Southside With You***

While this one is a biopic about former President [*Barack Obama*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/barack-obama?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and First Lady [*Michelle Obama*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/michelle-obama?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), it's less official biopic and more love story. We never see the two in the White House, instead we see how the two met and fell in love, which clearly impacted the people they would eventually be in the White House. Considering President's Day is right after Valentine's Day, you can extend those lovey dovey vibes right through President's Day with this one.

***Primary Colors***

If you were alive in the 90s, then President [*Bill Clinton*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/bill-clinton?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) was a big part of your life. That's what makes this film so interesting. The novel it's based on was published anonymously (later revealed to be written by journalist Joe Klein), and it told the tale of a Southern governor's campaign for president amid a slew of extramarital affair allegations. (Sound familiar?) The book was huge, so when the film was adapted by Mike Nichols and we got a glimpse of John Travolta as Jack Stanton, it was clear this was the story of Bill Clinton. What's great about this movie is that while it's so obviously about the Clintons, it still feels like fiction in a cinematic way. For me, Emma Thompson as the [*Hillary Clinton*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/hillary-clinton?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)-inspired Susan Stanton is everything, and Kathy Bates' performance in the film is next level—and earned her an Academy Award nomination.

***John Adams***

What *Lincoln* did for the presidential biopic movie, *John Adams* did for the TV limited series. Paul Giamatti as the second President John Adams is just as mesmerizing as Day-Lewis' Lincoln, but the difference between the two is that Lincoln is like inspiration cat nip, while Adams is a bit more complicated. He's not likable, but somehow Giamatti finds the inspiration in a man who defined so much of the Constitution we have today. Watch it for Giamatti's performance, stay for Laura Linney's incredible take on Adams' wife Abigail.

***Mars Attacks***

Similar to Deep Impact, this isn't necessarily a movie about a president, but involves some great scenes with Jack Nicholson playing President James Dale. The film is about, well, aliens attacking the Earth. It's a Tim Burton camp classic with an all-star cast, but Nicholson's Dale is a standout. That said, there's a scene where First Lady Marsha Dale (played by Glenn Close) gets killed by an alien that is one of the funniest things you'll ever see.

***The Butler***

Lee Daniels' *The Butler* tells the story of Cecil Gaines, the head butler of the White House as he serves presidents ranging from Harry S. Truman to Ronald Reagan. Gaines' story was inspired by the true story of Eugene Allen. You really get a fly on the wall perspective of American 20th century history through Forest Whitaker's performance.

***Thirteen Days***

This movie is the rare real-life thriller involving a president. It shows the extraordinary 13-day period where President John F. Kennedy (played by Bruce Greenwood) grappled with the possibility of the former Soviet Union placing nuclear weapons in Cuba. The way this movie stressed me out, but in a good way.

***All the President's Men***

I added two films related to former president Richard Nixon to this list, because in my opinion he's one of the most dramatic presidents to have every served the United States. *All the President's Men* tells the story of his downfall without ever really showing him at all. Instead the film focuses on Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and [*Carl Bernstein*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/carl-bernstein?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) (Dustin Hoffman), the two Washington Post reporters who covered the Watergate scandal that ultimately forced Nixon to resign in disgrace. This one is a slow burn thriller, but totally worth it.

***Nixon***

The other film about Nixon on this list is Oliver Stone's *Nixon*. A traditional biopic that takes certainly fictional liberties that has become commonplace for Stone's work, this film perfectly portrays the Shakespearean tragedy that was Richard Nixon. And Anthony Hopkins as Nixon delivers on the tragedy of it all, showing a man filled with jealousy and rage, but also someone who just needed maybe a hug. The other standout performance in this film is Joan Allen as First Lady Pat Nixon.

***The Contender***

Speaking of Joan Allen, we need to talk about *The Contender*. I feel like people have forgotten about this movie, but it's legit a perfect little dramatic thriller. Allen plays Senator Laine Hanson, who is picked to be the first female vice president by sitting President Jackson Evans (Jeff Bridges). But a sex scandal rattles her chances of being confirmed by the U.S. [*Senate*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/senate?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). There's a monologue towards the end of the film that is just an acting tour-de-force by Allen. And Bridges' Evans gives off Lyndon Johnson vibes, hovering over people, intimidating them. It's just so good.

If you do watch any of the things above, let me know, I'm [*HAlanScott*](https://linktr.ee/halanscott) on everything.

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2349274/presidents-day-movies-2024.jpg)

**Graphic**

President's Day Movies 2024

Columbia Pictures/Getty Images

Gary Oldman aiming gun at Harrison Ford in a scene from the film 'Air Force One', 1997. (Photo by Columbia Pictures/Getty Images)

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