



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# The Manchurian Candidate

In September 1961, Frank Sinatra – the most widely publicised of the president’s friends – was a weekend guest at the Kennedy compound in Hyannis Port. Among other things, Sinatra used his visit to secure the president’s approval for the movie that he, writer George Axelrod and director John Frankenheimer hoped to adapt from Richard Condon’s lurid thriller *The Manchurian Candidate*. Sinatra had a deal with United Artists, but UA president Arthur Krim – who was also the national finance chairman for the Democratic Party – felt that the project was political dynamite. Published in April 1959, *The Manchurian Candidate* had posited the outrageously paranoid premise that the Russians and Chinese had infiltrated the highest levels of American electoral politics with brainwashed dupes. It was a comic version of the John Birch Society’s so-called ‘Black Book’ – a samizdat that had been circulating among the true believers since the summer of 1958 – in which Birch Society founder Robert Welch identified President Eisenhower as the dedicated agent of a vast Communist conspiracy, who had been painstakingly manoeuvred by his Kremlin handlers into the White House.

*Variety* had previewed *The Manchurian Candidate* in late September [1962], a month before the [Cuban Missile] crisis, and predicted blockbuster results. According to director John Frankenheimer, however, the first public preview was ‘hysterical’. The film was denounced by the American Legion and the Communist Party; the day before it opened, it was attacked by a widely syndicated Catholic film critic as ‘anti-anti-Communism gone crazy, like a fox. Like a red fox.’ It had its premiere on 24 October, even as Strategic Air Command heightened its alert posture and Soviet ships headed towards the edge of the US quarantine. (So did *We’ll Bury You!*, a newsreel compilation distributed by Columbia Pictures. ‘It was a grim experience,’ *The New York Times* reported, ‘to sit in a darkened theatre, watch a chillingly convincing documentary on the spread of Communism and wonder, meanwhile, what was developing on the high seas.’)

Politics as spectacle, *The Manchurian Candidate* is the quintessential Kennedy-era thriller, a movie which conflates right-wing demagogues and the international communist conspiracy, mind control and assassination, uncorking a plot which, as one conspirator brags, would ‘rally a nation of television viewers to sweep us into the White House with powers that make martial law look like anarchy.’ *The Manchurian Candidate*, which permitted its star to engage in the first-ever karate fight in an American movie, was Bond-like in its futuristic technology, robotic hit-men, sinister Asians (one played by Khigh Dhiegh, a member of New York’s avant-garde Living Theater), and jocular violence. But given its deadpan non-sequiturs and matter-of-fact integration of dreams, flashbacks and waking reality (modelled, according to screenwriter Axelrod, on Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour*), it was far crazier. What was one to make of the continual identification of communists with motherhood, a costume party to which a McCarthy-like senator comes dressed as Lincoln to nibble on an American flag made out of Polish caviar, or

the use of the national anthem to forestall the hero's preventing the climactic assassination?

Andrew Sarris would point out that *The Manchurian Candidate* reflected 'a new conception of America as dangerously "sick".' But *The Manchurian Candidate*'s cynical, absurdist tone was itself 'sick' – in the sense with which the word had been applied to a form of American humour since the 'Sputnikchina'. (Indeed, the jokey headlines occasioned by the failure of the Vanguard rocket – Flopnik, Kaputnik, Stayputnik – in what Tom Wolfe called a 'hideous cackle of national self-loathing' were an earlier popular manifestation of the sick.)

Like the John Birch Society 'Black Book', *The Manchurian Candidate* offered a retrospective of Cold War concerns, from television image-building to communist infiltration of the government. Unlike the mildly futuristic novel, the movie is a period piece that has its climax at the 1956 Republican Convention. In addition to speculating on how a McCarthy might have been nominated, it took an extremely literal and highly fanciful view of behavioural modification, or 'brainwashing'. Associated with Chinese propaganda, the term was in common usage by the end of the Korean War. Indeed, *The Manchurian Candidate* became an explanation for brainwashing – so much so that a 1979 ABC documentary on CIA 'mind control' used clips from the movie to illustrate its thesis. By that time, *The Manchurian Candidate* had been out of circulation for almost a decade, withdrawn by Sinatra in the early 70s.

Sinatra's alleged reasons for suppressing *The Manchurian Candidate* have become incorporated in the film's meaning. He was, it was said, disturbed at having produced so prophetic a vision. (At the same time that Sinatra pulled *The Manchurian Candidate* from circulation, he also withdrew *Suddenly* – an obscure 1954 movie in which he played a would-be presidential assassin and which Marina Oswald told the Warren Commission her husband had seen on Dallas television shortly before Kennedy was shot.) When *The Manchurian Candidate* was finally reissued, after a well-publicised showing at the 1987 New York Film Festival, it was explained that Sinatra had taken the movie out of circulation in a dispute with United Artists over money. But although it has since become a part of *The Manchurian Candidate*'s mythology that it was a popular failure, the movie had supplanted *The Longest Day* as the national box-office champion by Election Day 1962. Nor was it critically misunderstood. *The New Yorker* seconded *Variety*'s enthusiasm, beginning a rave review with 'many loud hurrahs': *The New York Times* was less than amused, charging Sinatra with 'a grave sort of irresponsibility'. Referring to other unnamed Sinatra films where 'truth has been distorted and angled to get wild effects', the *Times* compared his technique with that of 'the "big lie"', concluding that 'this does not do credit to American films'. When *The Manchurian Candidate* opened in Paris in December the critic for *L'Express* wrote that she left the theatre praying that something of Europe would be able to survive the impending clash between the two superpowers. *Le Monde* concurred. Although the movie was 'incoherent', it would certainly help to fuel 'anti-American propaganda'.

**J. Hoberman, *Sight & Sound*, December 1993**

THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE

Directed by: John Frankenheimer  
©: M.C. Productions  
Released thru: United Artists  
Executive Producer: Howard W. Koch  
Produced by: George Axelrod, John Frankenheimer  
Assistant Director: Joseph Behm  
Script Supervisor: Amalia Wade  
Screenplay by: George Axelrod  
Based upon a novel by: Richard Condon  
Director of Photography: Lionel Lindon  
Photographic Effects: Howard Anderson Co.  
Operative Cameraman: John Mehl  
Special Effects: Paul Pollard  
Editor: Ferris Webster  
Assistant Film Editor: Carl Mahakian  
Production Designer: Richard Sylbert  
Assistant Art Director: Philip M. Jefferies  
Set Decorator: George R. Nelson  
Property Master: Arden Cripe  
Costumes by: Moss Mabry  
Costumer: Wesley V. Jefferies  
Jewels by: Ruser of Beverly Hills  
Makeup Artists: Bernard Ponedel, Jack Freeman, Ron Berkeley  
Hair Stylist: Mary Westmoreland  
Janet Leigh’s Hair Styles by: Gene Shacove  
Music Composed and Conducted by: David Amram  
Music Editor: Richard Carruth  
Music Recording: Vinton Vernon  
Sound Mixer: Joe Edmondson  
Re-recording: Buddy Myers  
Sound System: Westrex Recording System  
Sound Effects Editor: Del Harris  
Maps provided through the courtesy of: American Map Company, Inc.  
Dialogue Coach: Thom Conroy

uncredited  
Production Assistant: Gene Martell  
2nd Assistant Directors: David Salven, Read Killgore  
Script Supervisors: Molly Kent, Grace Dubray  
Camera Assistants: Felix Barlow, Eugene Levitt  
Grips: Richard Borland, Gaylin Schultz  
Gaffer: Robert Campbell  
Stills: Bill Creamer  
Set Designers: Lucius O. Croxton, Seymour Klate,  
John M. Elliott, Joseph S. Tolby  
Props: Richard M. Rubin  
Wardrobe: Morris Brown, Ron Talsky,  
Angela Alexander, Rose Viebeck  
Makeup: Dorothy Parkinson  
Sound Recording: Paul Wolfe  
Boom Operator: William Flannery

Cast

Frank Sinatra (Bennet Marco)  
Laurence Harvey (Raymond Shaw)  
Janet Leigh (Eugénie Rose ‘Rosie’ Cheyney)  
Angela Lansbury (Eleanor Shaw Iselin, Raymond’s mother)  
Henry Silva (Chunjin)  
James Gregory (Senator John Yerkes Iselin)  
Leslie Parrish (Jocie Jordan)  
John McGiver (Senator Thomas Jordan)  
Khigh Dhiegh (Yen Lo)  
James Edwards (Corporal Al Melvin)  
Douglas Henderson (colonel)  
Albert Paulsen (Zilkov)  
Barry Kelley (Secretary of Defense)  
Lloyd Corrigan (Holborn Gaines)  
Madame Spivy (Berezovo’s lady counterpart)  
  
uncredited  
Joe Adams (psychiatrist)  
Whit Bissell (medical officer)  
Mimi Dillard (Mrs Melvin)  
Anton Van Stralen (officer)  
John Laurence (Gossfeld)  
Tom Lowell (Bobby Lembeck)  
Richard LaPore (Ed Navole)  
Nick Bolin (Berezovo)  
Nicky Blair (Silvers)  
William Thourlby (Little)  
Irving Steinberg (Freeman)  
John Francis (Haiken)  
Robert Riordon (Benjamin K. Arthur, the nominee)  
Reggie Nalder (Gomel)  
Miyoshi Jingu (Miss Gertrude)  
Anna Shin (Korean girl)  
Helen KleeB, Maye Henderson (charladies)  
Mickey Finn, Richard Norris, John Indrisano (reporters)  
Lou Krugg (manager)  
Mike Masters, Tom Harris (FBI men)  
Mariquita Moll (soprano)  
Robert Burton (convention chairman)  
Karen Norris (secretary)  
Bess Flowers (Gomel’s lady counterpart)  
Jean Vaughn (nurse)  
Ray Spiker (policeman)  
Merritt Bohn (Jilly)  
Frank Basso (photographer)  
Harry Holcombe (general)  
Julie Payne, Lana Crawford, Evelyn Byrd (guests at party)  
Ray Dailey (page boy)  
Estelle Etterre, Mary Benoit, Rita Kenaston, Maggie Hathaway,  
Joan Douglas, Frances Nealy, Evelyn Byrd (women in hotel lobby)  
Ralph Gambina, Sam ‘Kid’ Hogan (men in hotel lobby)  
James Yagi, Lee Tung Foo, Raynum Tsukamoto  
(Chinese gentlemen in hotel lobby)

USA 1962©  
126 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Illustrious Corpses (Cadaveri eccellenti)  
Thu 21 Oct 20:30; Mon 25 Oct 14:15; Fri 19 Nov 20:40; Sat 27 Nov 18:10  
Un Flic Fri 22 Oct 14:20; Tue 23 Nov 20:45; Mon 29 Nov 20:55  
Chinatown Sun 24 Oct 11:50; Wed 27 Oct 14:15; Sat 20 Nov 20:30  
Heat Sun 24 Oct 14:30; Sat 13 Nov 16:30; Mon 15 Nov 13:40  
Devil in a Blue Dress Thu 28 Oct 20:50; Wed 17 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by  
Empire Magazine Contributing Editor Amon Warmann)  
Murder on the Orient Express Sat 23 Oct 17:30; Sun 7 Nov 18:10;  
Tue 16 Nov 14:15  
Blue Velvet Tue 26 Oct 14:30; Tue 2 Nov 18:00; Sat 13 Nov 20:45;  
Sun 21 Nov 17:40  
Dirty Harry Wed 27 Oct 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by film scholar  
Hannah Hamad, Cardiff University); Sun 14 Nov 18:20; Fri 26 Nov 20:45

The Silence of the Lambs Fri 29 Oct 20:40; Wed 3 Nov 19:00 (+ pre-  
recorded intro by Professor Yvonne Tasker, author of BFI Film Classics  
The Silence of the Lambs); Thu 18 Nov 14:40  
No Country for Old Men Sat 30 Oct 11:00; Mon 1 Nov 20:30;  
Wed 24 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)  
In the Cut Sun 31 Oct 18:30; Tue 30 Nov 18:10  
House of Bamboo Thu 4 Nov 20:50; Thu 11 Nov 14:30;  
Mon 15 Nov 18:10  
Kiss Me Deadly Fri 5 Nov 20:40; Sat 20 Nov 18:00; Sat 28 Nov 12:15  
Zero Dark Thirty Sat 6 Nov 17:30; Tue 9 Nov 14:15; Sun 28 Nov 15:20  
Inside Man Mon 8 Nov 20:30; Thu 25 Nov 14:30; Tue 30 Nov 20:20  
The Long Goodbye Wed 10 Nov 17:50 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,  
Programmer-at-Large); Sat 27 Nov 20:40  
Shaft Fri 12 Nov 20:50; Tue 23 Nov 18:20  
The Manchurian Candidate Sun 21 Nov 14:50

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