

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*American Dreamz*]

Mr. Quaid Goes to Washington

By Steve Sailer

“... AND THE SCREENPLAY practically writes itself!”

It's hard to avoid suspecting that's how filmmaker Paul Weitz ended his pitch to Universal of the clever concept and casting for his *roman à clef* comedy “American Dreamz.”

Having made “About a Boy” with Hugh Grant in 2002 and “In Good Company” with Dennis Quaid in 2005, both solid films, it must have seemed only natural to Weitz—son of fashion designer turned historian John Weitz—to cast the two veterans together.

After dithering away the early years of his career as a fluttery romantic lead, Grant has emerged since 2001's “Bridget Jones' Diary” as Hollywood's finest cad, a worthy successor to the sardonic George Sanders. So why not have Grant play a self-loathing game-show host based on Simon Cowell, the scathing English judge on the top-rated television show of the decade, “American Idol”?

Back in the 1980s, Quaid's status was a lot like Ronald Reagan's in the early 1940s—a likeable and reliable second-tier leading man. Then Quaid wrecked his career with cocaine. He has made a comeback playing middle-aged Texans

—winningly in “The Rookie” as a washed-up minor leaguer and distressingly in “The Alamo” as a Sam Houston, who seems to be suffering from a gastrointestinal malady. So let's cast him as a clueless doofus based on George W. Bush!

But how exactly do Simon and George wind up in the same movie?

Well, uh ... the president could come down with clinical depression when he finally realizes how unqualified he is for the job. His chief of staff, a Dick Cheney / Karl Rove Svengali played by Willem Dafoe, then books him on *American Dreamz* as a guest judge to boost his polls. A show-tunes-loving Iraqi immigrant contestant, whose mother was killed by American bombs, is assigned by Osama bin Laden to blow up the president. But are 72 virgins enough to persuade Omer to forego singing “The Impossible Dream” to 72 million viewers? And as the suicide-bomber's main rival, Mandy Moore plays a rural ingénue who turns out as media-savvy and manipulative as Paris Hilton.

Unfortunately, screenplays don't actually write themselves, and Weitz never quite figured out whether he wanted all this complicated plotting to wind up brutally satirical or sweetly silly. “American Dreamz” isn't a bad movie, but his script is too on-the-nose to be terribly funny.

One problem with “American Dreamz” as a satire is that “American Idol” is one of those rare pop culture phenomena, like the “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” quiz show a half-dozen years ago, that just isn't all that deplorable. “Idol”'s basic appeal is ancient: it's a singing contest for the whole family to watch. And its most controversial feature—Simon's blunt

advice to many entrants to discard their dreams and get a real job, something that powerful men in the music industry are not always known for saying when confronted with pretty but talentless girls desperate for a break—is also its most admirable. If you wonder how movie people can be so self-righteous despite their often dubious personal behavior, one answer lies in their ability to say, “At least we're not music executives.”

Quaid's portrayal of Bush is merely a more sympathetic version of Chris Cooper's take on the president as an utter nimrod in John Sayles's 2004 flop “Silver City.” (So far, the only fictional version of Bush to show much insight has been Hoyt Thorpe, the malevolent but brave and charismatic frat boy in Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*.)

Sneering at Bush's IQ hasn't helped Democrats yet. The only election Bush ever lost was his 1978 run for Congress from Midland, when his Democratic opponent taunted him for earning two Ivy League degrees. That was the last time any rival outdumbed him.

As I demonstrated in 2004, Bush slightly outscored John Kerry on their military officer qualification IQ exams—when NBC's Tom Brokaw mentioned my analysis to Kerry, he replied, “I must have been drinking the night before I took that military aptitude test.” And last summer, it emerged that Kerry's grade point average at Yale was below Bush's.

No, Bush isn't dumb. Instead, he is hypercompetitive and aware of how little competence matters in winning presidential elections these days. Now, though, he's done running for president and finally has to start running the government. ■

Rated PG-13 for brief strong language and some sexual ref-

BOOKS

[*The Brothers Bulger: How They Terrorized and Corrupted Boston for a Quarter Century*, Howie Carr, Warner Books, 342 pages]

How Whitey Bulger Bought Boston

by William Norman Grigg

PEGGY WESTCOAT was a woman of small skills and modest ambitions. Just before Christmas in 1980, two men broke into the single-family home Peggy shared with a live-in boyfriend in southwest Dade County. The intruders threw a rope around the boyfriend's neck and hanged him near the front door. They then grabbed Peggy, shoved her against the kitchen sink, draped a noose around her neck, and began feeding the other end of the rope into a garbage disposal.

With the rope tight enough to terrify the victim without rendering her unconscious, the assailants turned off the grinder and began asking the terrified woman about her work as a cashier at the Miami "fronton" (or arena) of World Jai Alai, an exotic Iberian sport that had been controlled by Bostonians since the 1920s. A few months earlier, World Jai Alai had been sold to a new owner, and Boston's Winter Hill mob—led by James "Whitey" Bulger—wanted to know if the new owners had discovered the mob's skimming operation. Satisfied by Peggy's panicked answers, the invaders flipped the switch on the disposal.

"When the cops found the two bodies the next day," notes *Boston Herald* columnist Howie Carr in *The Brothers Bulger*, "they chalked it up as another Miami drug deal gone bad." In fact, it was just one of scores of murders committed by a Boston crime combine that wedded the Irish mob to the FBI. That

marriage eventually broke up in 1996, when Bulger—tipped off by his FBI handler, John Connolly—fled the United States one step ahead of several murder indictments. He is presently number two on the FBI's Most Wanted list, below another one-time asset of the federal government named Osama bin Laden.

Connolly, convicted of various racketeering charges, is in prison until at least 2010. He also faces first-degree murder charges in Florida for allegedly providing information that led to the murder of Peggy Westcoat's one-time boss, World Jai Alai president John Callahan.

At the time of Peggy Westcoat's murder, the head of security for World Jai Alai was retired FBI Special Agent H. Paul Rico. Rico had taken note of Whitey Bulger in the early 1950s, when the future head of the Irish mob was a small-caliber hoodlum working as a homosexual prostitute. Rico, writes Carr, "could justify his sojourns to the Bay Village gay clubs as reaching out to new 'sources.'"

From the very beginning of his career as a South Boston thug, Bulger was an informant. Gangsters planning to hijack a truck "might mention something about a future score to Whitey, just in passing, and sure enough, when they showed up

find "a cure for schizophrenia." Dr. Jules Pfeiffer, who supervised the experiments, was working off a grant provided by the CIA, which probably wasn't interested in humanitarian applications of the drug.

Whitey returned to Southie in 1965, just in time to benefit from three critical developments. First, the FBI—in keeping with Robert Kennedy's priorities—had decided to tear into La Cosa Nostra (better known as the Mafia). Special Agent Rico thus began to cultivate informants and allies within the Winter Hill mob, the Mafia's deadly rival.

Second, just days before Whitey's return, one of Rico's informants, Jimmy "The Bear" Flemmi, murdered an undistinguished thug named Edward Deegan. In order to protect their informant, the Boston FBI office conducted a cover-up, sending four admittedly unsavory men to prison for Deegan's murder, which they didn't commit. By collaborating in that murder and cover-up, the Boston FBI office effectively "made its bones" as a full-fledged ally of the Irish mob.

But for Whitey Bulger the most propitious development was the emergence of his younger brother Billy as a rising political star in Bay State politics, which Carr describes as seamlessly integrated with the underworld.

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to grab the truck, the FBI or the local cops would be there waiting," Carr recounts. "H. Paul Rico's personnel file soon included commendations from the director, J. Edgar Hoover. At the same time, no one suspected Whitey—it was inconceivable that one of Southie's own would become a rat."

Sent to prison in Atlanta for bank robbery in 1956, Whitey volunteered to serve as a test subject in LSD experiments in exchange for time off his 20-year sentence. "We were recruited by deception," Bulger later complained, recalling that he was supposedly helping

In 1961, when the Kennedy family entered the White House and Billy Bulger made his debut as a state legislator, the informal rules of conduct on Beacon Hill "boiled down to three points: Nothing on the level; everything is a deal; no deal [is] too small," writes Carr. Massachusetts novelist Edwin O'Connor describes state politics as "a special kind of tainted, small-time fellowship" through which "even the sleaziest poolroom bookie managed, in some way, however obscure, to be in touch with the mayor's office or the governor's chair."