

Congress needs more 'Mr. Smiths': Editorial

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At yuletide, Jimmy Stewart dominates TV. As the cash-poor, careworn George Bailey, his spiral into the desperate realm of *be-careful-what-you-wish-for* reminds the disgruntled "It's a Wonderful Life."

All the same, even as jingling bells announce squadrons of angels have received their wings, we can't help but think of another Stewart flick that gains currency next month.

On Jan. 6, the 114th Congress succeeds the infamous "Do-nothing" 113th edition. Its swearing-in creates an intriguing confluence: Members, some elected for the first time in November's midterms, will troop to D.C. amid the diamond anniversary of "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

Frank Capra's award-winning flick tells the story of a naïve, idealistic Everyman whose unwavering belief in freedom, democracy and ethics runs smack into amoral Washington political skulduggery. After 75 years, the film holds up.

For better or worse.

For better, Smith today would serve in a body that more fully embraces the pluralism celebrated in America's founding documents.

"Mr. Smith went to a Congress dominated almost exclusively by white men," notes Mark Byrnes, who has featured "Mr. Smith" for nearly 20 years in his "Politics and Film" course at Middle Tennessee State University. "Today's Congress — although its demographic makeup still does not perfectly mirror the population — is much more diverse."

Yet, in many ways, had Jefferson Smith, his state's head of the Boy Rangers clubs, been elected to Congress last month, he'd arrive — nearly four-score years after the movie's debut — in a sadly familiar Washington.

"What hasn't changed is the influence held by monied interests," Byrnes observes. "In the film, political boss Jim Taylor pulls the strings of numerous members of Congress. Today, wealthy individuals can still indirectly funnel vast sums of money into congressional races."

That isn't to say modern lawmakers haven't evolved.

"Current senators are corrupt, but not in the way portrayed in 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,'" says John B. Gilmour, professor of government and public policy at the College of William & Mary.

"They are mostly not enriching themselves personally, but [congressional] representatives take campaign contributions from powerful industries and do their bidding. Witness the recent rollback of financial regulations."

Such appalling behavior wouldn't have surprised Sen. Joseph Harrison Paine, the senior senator who gave Smith the lay of the treacherous land inside the beltway.

"This is a man's world, Jeff," he told Smith, "and you've got to check your ideals outside the door, like you do your rubbers. ... I compromised — yes! ... I've had to play ball. You can't count on people voting. Half the time they don't vote anyway. ..."

Sadly, his analysis was prescient. Only 36.4 percent of eligible voters turned out in 2014.

Congress' blemishes are enough to sour even a true believer, like Smith, to flee "the whole rotten show."

Yet, greenhorn lawmakers bound for D.C. next month who carry even a shred of Smith in them can, like him, clutch this eternal verity: Even a sometimes-corrupted process cannot tarnish America's gilded ideas.

"Great principles don't get lost once they come to light," Smith realized. "They're right here. You just have to see them again."

America is eager to see them — rather than dysfunction — again, if polls capturing historical low satisfaction with Congress are an indicator.

It might be too much of a Hollywood ending to hope that this new batch headed to Washington courses with public servants who share Smith's unwavering moral compass and steadfast will to serve *constituents*, not mammon.

We hope not. Perhaps then, echoing "Mr. Smith" reporter Diz Moore, we, too, will shout "Yippee!" — our faith and idealism restored.

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