

Political Thriller

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The primary author is the individual who drafted the first version of this section; a section that could have been modified since it was originally published.



From William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to Oliver Stone's upcoming film about Edward Snowden, why are we so enthralled with political thrillers? After I saw the movie *Absolute Power* (1997), I became intrigued with the political thriller genre. I began thinking what would happen if the bad guy won? Are there any political thriller movies where the villain wins? It all depends on who the villain is, which then got me thinking about the heroes and villains of the genre.

Let's start with the definition: A political thriller is set against a backdrop of some kind of political struggle. There could be many plots and many opponents and villains, but only one hero. They can be national or international. What this boils down to is that a political thriller must have a hero, a villain and a realistic plot. If we don't believe the plot, than it turns into science fiction or just a plain thriller.

The first political thriller movie could arguably be [The Man Who Knew Too Much](#) (1934) directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock made many films, but most were considered in the suspense genre with politics interwoven into the plot. In this movie, while on vacation, an English couple's daughter is kidnapped and held hostage because the father has documents collected from his dying friend's apartment that need to be delivered to the embassy. The hero is actually the wife who shoots the villain off a rooftop at the end of the movie.

Some people consider *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) as the first political thriller, because you cannot remove politics from this film and still have any type of plot. It is more about a family's politics than government politics, but communism is a major part of the film. It was released at the height of the Cuban missile crisis and showed American audiences how communism will undermine our democracy. Could someone be brainwashed into a presidential candidate? [This clip](#) from the film explains it best.

What is a hero and what makes the hero so likeable and real? Ian Scott writes in *American Politics in Hollywood Film*, the hero is a "rogue, lone heroic figure that battles forces they know little of..." Some heroes in these movies are Harrison Ford in *Air Force One* (1997) and Clint Eastwood in *Absolute Power* (1997). They include anyone from the President of the United States, to a thief that breaks into the White House. They also include people that have no idea that they are heroes, such as Raymond Shaw in *The Manchurian Candidate*.

The villain is the person we love to hate. The villain can be a crazed loner or manipulated by some foreign government; or, worse yet, our own government. The villain that I remember the most was Sir Laurence Olivier from *Marathon Man* (1976). He played Dr. Christian Szell, the sadistic Nazi dentist. But let's not forget the manipulative Mrs. Iselin in *The Manchurian Candidate*.



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Last updated on 22 December 2014

Photo Credit: Screen capture from *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962)

This brings me back to my original thought; does the villain ever win? After doing my research, there are many political thriller movies where no one wins. The audience is left wondering "what if?" For example, in *The Manchurian Candidate*, the hero and villain both die.

Arlington Road (1999) is one movie where the villain wins. This movie is generally not categorized as a political thriller; only as a thriller. However, because it has to do with terrorism, I consider it a political thriller. While doing my research, I noticed that there weren't a lot of films that were classified as actual "Political Thrillers," but there were thrillers with a varying amount of politics in their theme. In this movie, a man becomes convinced that his neighbor is a terrorist and plans to use a bomb somewhere in Washington D.C. At the end of this movie, the bomb that was placed in the trunk of the hero's car explodes in the parking garage of the FBI building. The hero is treated as the villain and the real villain walks away.

I don't think any film director has served to redefine the political thriller genre better than Oliver Stone with his film *JFK* (1992). "Before its release, all political thriller films had the same ideology and cinematic style. After its release, the movie a whole new generation of engaged and posturing thriller pieces owed something to Stone's radical agenda." Before *JFK*, Oliver Stone was no stranger to controversial movies and American policy. However, even he was not prepared for the backlash he received after the release of this film. [In this clip](#), you can see how the backlash affected Oliver Stone.

In *JFK*, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was seen through the eyes of the New Orleans District Attorney. Stone's repetitive use of the 26 second [Zapruder film](#) created almost a documentary effect. The Zapruder film has its own controversies and conspiracy theorists, therefore making it seem like truth in *JFK* was a point of contention with many critics. While doing my research, there were quite a few references to *JFK* as more of a hypothesis of historical events, or a conspiracy film and not a political thriller.

There were many political thriller films that were released in the 1970s, including *The Parallax View* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), and *All the President's Men* (1976). These movies have two things in common: the political cover-up and getting to the truth. You can see how the American view changed after the Vietnam War and how the counterculture was beginning to infect our viewpoint of the government. This period was the beginning of American paranoia regarding its own government.

Some of my favorite political thriller films are *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *The Day of the Jackal* (1973), *Absolute Power* (1997), and *Air Force One* (1997). The movies *State of Play* (2009), and *Murder at 1600* (1997) are both about murders in Washington D.C.

I find it interesting that there are so many movies released in 1997 that are political thrillers. What happened in history that would want Hollywood to make four films in the political thriller genre? Looking back to 1996, was the year of the bombing at the Atlanta, GA Olympics. But I think a better date would be in April 1995 with the Oklahoma City bombing.



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Last updated on 22 December 2014

Photo Credit: Screen capture from *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962)

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