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Are They Ready for Their Close-Up? Civil Servants and Their Portrayal in Contemporary American Cinema

Michelle C. Pautz and Laura Roselle

Norma Desmond famously says in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), "All right, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my closeup."¹ Since then, this phrase has been uttered countless times to ensure the camera does not start rolling until everyone is ready. But all are not afforded the opportunity to get ready and civil servants fall squarely into this category. We know that government bureaucrats are among those individuals that Americans love to hate and attacks on the civil service come from a plethora of sources.² And because of the ability of film (as well as other narrative forms) to influence perceptions and stereotypes about government (c.f. McCurdy 1995; Holzer and Slater 1995; Lichter, Lichter, and Amundson 2000; Holley and Lutte 2000), it is important to understand how civil servants are portrayed in American film.

Unfortunately, the empirical exploration of civil servants in film remains understudied. The existing research on the portrayal of government in film is inadequate for several reasons. First, a large scale examination of a wide range of films has not been conducted to ascertain how films portray government, and specifically, bureaucrats. In addition, most of the scholarship focuses on small samples or employs case study methodology that looks at a handful of predetermined films to examine the different views of government offered by Hollywood. Finally, often the films that are profiled are rather obscure and one would have difficulty finding many individuals who have actually heard of the films examined, let alone seen them. Thus, the question that arises is how is government, and more specifically civil servants, portrayed in the most popular films in the United States?

In an effort to more fully explore the depictions that contemporary American film presents of

¹ For those readers who have not seen Billy Wilder's classic Hollywood-on-Hollywood film, aging silent screen star Norma Desmond believes (in the final scene of the film when she utters her famous line) that she is shooting her next film with Cecil B. DeMille, rather than being arrested on homicide charges.

² See Goodsell (2004) for a concise but comprehensive overview for the disdain of government bureaucrats.

government and civil servants, this paper endeavors to address many of the omissions of the existing literature. The films selected for study are the top ten domestic box office grossing films in the United States from 1992 through 2006. These 150 films are the films most likely to have been seen by the majority of Americans. As a result of this large sample, the films included are the ones that have the greatest exposure to the movie-going public in the United States; accordingly, a holistic assessment of how Hollywood routinely portrays civil servants is possible. In the end, we find that the U.S. government is frequently depicted in a negative light, but that civil servants are a different story, especially in the last five years. Civil servants are, more often than not, presented as intelligent, well-trained, and efficient.

This paper first presents an overview of perceptions and how they are informed by various narrative forms, particularly film. Then it turns to the treatment of fiction and film in the public administration literature and considers the sparse research to date that explores how government is portrayed in film. After establishing the context for our research, the methods are presented and the findings from 150 films that depict more than 300 civil servants are summarized. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of our findings and their implications.

Perceptions

Perceptions come from the various ways individuals make sense of their surroundings over time and perceptions define how individuals think about the world around them. Each individual forms and maintains perceptions about a variety of topics and experiences. What a person thinks about an individual or a situation will impact the way he/she deals with that individual or how he/she approaches a similar situation in the future. For example, if a citizen frequents his local post office several times a month and always encounters long lines that move very slowly and clerks that seem unable to accomplish the simplest of tasks, he is likely to assume that all post offices employ slow and incompetent clerks. In essence, perceptions help people form or reinforce their own biases.

For the purposes of this paper, perceptions of government are of particular interest. It is virtually indisputable that Americans have negative perceptions of their government and the majority of citizens have held such beliefs for quite some time. "...Americans are taught throughout our lives, from hearth and home on through school and career, that our government is a sea of waste, a swamp of incompetence, a mountain of unchecked power, an endless plain of mediocrity" (Goodsell 2004, 3). Few would challenge Goodsell's articulation of the average American's perceptions of government. Americans have great disdain for their government in general and for the individuals that carry out the work of government. Politicians are often looked at warily and civil servants do not fair any better. In particular, "[b]ureaucrats – with the word uttered in contempt – are alleged in all quarters to be lazy, incompetent, devious, and even dangerous" (Goodsell 3, emphasis original). These views are so commonplace, few endeavor to challenge them. Goodsell (2004) is one exception and refutes the pervasive stereotype of the inept and idle civil servant. However, while Goodsell makes a sound counterargument to these common percep-

tions, he does not explore in great detail the sources of those perceptions. The sources of these perceptions are vast, but one important source is the narrative.

Perceptions and Film

Narratives, or stories, are relayed through a variety of media, such as books, plays, movies, and television, and countless Americans engage them every year. Not only do narratives entertain, they also influence people on a host of subjects. The ability of narratives to influence may have little to do with the accuracy of the reality they depict; therefore, the ideas that audience members take away may in turn shape individuals' perceptions. Narratives help shape perceptions (c.f. Kolker 1999).³ In particular, movies can influence perceptions and behaviors about political culture (Franklin 2006, 6) and government more generally (Ortega-Liston 2000). Although all narrative forms can impact perceptions about government, film is of particular interest for several reasons.

First, since the advent of the cinema in the 1890s, through the nickelodeon era, to the dawn of cinemascope, and the modern era of multiplexes and movies on demand in American living rooms, film reaches more Americans than other forms of entertainment (Sklar 1994; Cook 1996; Vogel 1998). Indeed, 1.47 billion movie tickets were purchased in 2007 alone and this does not account for the number of movies watched at home or in other venues (Motion Picture Association of America 2007, 2). Even in economic down turns, both past and present, Americans still flock to the movies (c.f. Cieply and Barnes 2009; Pautz 2002). As a result, movies reach a large section of the American population across demographics and socioeconomic status unlike many other narrative forms. Holzer and Slater (1995) note that one of the reasons that films can have such an effect on public perceptions is due to "the vast size of the audience" (77).

Second, it is important to focus on film particularly in conjunction with the perceptions of government portrayed because film reaches young people especially. Fifty-five percent of the moviegoers in the U.S. in 2007 were under the age of 39 (MPAA 2007, 2). Additionally, the same age group is most likely to see movies frequently (at least once per month) (MPAA 2). It may be argued that the perceptions of younger Americans are more pliable than older Americans; therefore, the influence of films on perceptions of government may be more significant.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, it is arguable that film has the greatest impact on perceptions of the narrative forms. "The visual image is encompassing, immersing. It allows for the total suspension of disbelief..." (Holzer and Slater 1995, 77). "Of the arts, the cinematic expe-

³ An important point worth considering is whether narratives, in particular film, fundamentally create perceptions and are the basis for views about government *or* if narratives and film reinforce existing perceptions and mirror current views of government. This question of causality or directionality is significant; however, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless of the position one takes on the aforementioned, the focus of this research on the portrayal of civil servants in contemporary American cinema and its findings can inform both viewpoints. For a more thorough consideration of this question, please see Franklin (2006) (particularly the Introduction) and Holzer and Slater (1995).

rience is among the most psychologically persuasive” (Lee and Paddock 2001). In other words, film has the ability to completely consume its audience and occupy more senses than many other narrative forms because the senses of sight and sound are engaged while watching a film.⁴

Political science has a sizable body of scholarship exploring film and politics; however, much of that research focuses on the parallels between politics and film, the influence of films on political culture, and the depiction of politicians in film (c.f. Franklin 2006; Neve 1992; Gianos 1999). However, in reaction to the pervasive negative perceptions about government, particularly bureaucrats, we are keenly interested in how civil servants are depicted in American film. More specifically, we want to determine whether or not “bureaucrat bashing” is commonplace in contemporary American film. Therefore, we turn to public administration to explore how civil servants are portrayed.

Civil Servants and Film

Public administration literature has long looked to various narrative forms to examine how government is portrayed (c.f. Kroll 1965; Waldo 1968; McCurdy 1995). While Goodsell and Murray (1995) note the importance of the arts to public administration, the chapters in their edited volume describe the frequent negative stereotypes employed by the arts in their depictions of government. In his broad look at fiction, McCurdy (1995) laments that “[p]artly because of the relentless message of imaginative authors, distrust of governmental institutions has become deeply ingrained in American culture” (McCurdy 504). Additionally, McCurdy goes on to say that attacking the government has “...prove[n] to be a certain method for enlisting audience sympathy in the United States” (504). In addition to these broad examinations, there has been some, albeit limited, study of the portrayal of civil servants in film.

Generally, civil servants appear to be negatively portrayed in American film. Holzer and Slater (1995) found “[v]irtually all depictions [of the bureaucracy] rework stereotypes to excess...[and] the attack is ceaseless and merciless” (76). “Movies, in short, have reinforced the public’s longstanding, poor image of government” (Holzer and Slater 85). Holley and Lutte (2000) make similar conclusions and go one step further to argue that Hollywood contributes to the negative perceptions about public administrators and their performance. In an effort to further investigate the ways civil servants are portrayed, some research devises categories of civil servants based on their depictions in film. For instance, Wielde and Schultz (2007) examine 40 movies to yield several distinct types of civil servants: Monstercrat, BlackHatocrat, Obsessocrat, Herocrat, Ethicrat, and Romanticrat. Through examining films that date back to 1940, Wielde and Schultz found that not all films portray civil servants negatively and the depiction of civil servants is more complicated than simply a positive or negative portrait.

Some research takes a different approach and proactively seeks films that portray government in

⁴ The cultivation literature, while focused on television, does suggest that when audiences enjoy media content, cognitive processes have less effect and cultivation effects may be more pronounced. (Nabi and Kremer 2004, 304).

a favorable light. For instance, Lee and Paddock (2001) sought films that depict “bureaucrat heroes” and identified 20 films based on their criteria. It is worth noting that among their 20 films, almost half are more than 30 years old and many of the films were not very successful at the box office. Lee and Paddock found that most of their bureaucrat heroes wore uniforms (largely military or law enforcement) and most of the heroes defied their agencies to be heroic.

Still other research looks for what films can teach about public administration, particularly for students. Ortega-Liston (2000) explores four films, *Nell*, *Absence of Malice*, *Norma Rae*, and *Patton*, for their relevance to the study of public administration. Holley and Lutte (2000) examine two films, *Ghostbusters* and *A Thousand Heroes*, and make the case that government should do more to counteract its negative image in film by being more proactive. Indeed Stainbun (1997) chronicles the efforts of the federal government to be increasingly accommodating to moviemakers.

This brief survey of existing research on the depiction of civil servants in film is intriguing and sparks debate; however, it also highlights several methodological concerns. First, much of the literature appears to take non-random samples of film and this can be problematic. Although the desire to seek out films that portray civil servants positively can be informative, it is difficult to ascertain their viewership. Caution should accompany broad conclusions about the depiction of civil servants in film if the films are decades old and they are relatively obscure and not commercially successful. Finally, most studies sample only a few films and do not allow for a more comprehensive view of American film and how civil servants are portrayed. As a result, we seek to examine how civil servants are portrayed in contemporary American cinema and outline a methodology below that endeavors to overcome some of the aforementioned obstacles.

Methodology

Based on these limitations of existing research, we have elected to study the top ten grossing films⁵ annually from 1992 through 2006. Since we are most interested in the portrayal of civil servants and the possible effects on the average movie-going American, we focus on the top ten grossing films as they represent the films most likely seen by the average American. In other words, the top grossing films annually are the movies most likely to have been seen by the largest audience.

We developed a coding instrument to address the following research questions.

- R1: What genres of films are included in the sample of most popular films?
- R2: What is the overall depiction of government in these films?
- R3: What are the demographic characteristics of the civil servants depicted?
- R4: What types of civil servants are found in these films?
- R5: What character attributes are associated with the civil servants?
- R6: What actions are the civil servants involved in?

⁵ Data on the top ten grossing films were compiled from domestic receipts reported on ShowBizData.com (www.showbizdata.com; accessed 13 October 2009); please see Appendix 2.

Civil servants were defined to include government employees at all levels and in all contexts, including imaginary and futuristic realms, such as those of *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*. We did not include elected officials, law enforcement, or military personnel. Elected officials are not civil servants by definition, even though the two categories are often erroneously collapsed, and politicians have often been examined in various research contexts (c.f. Gianos 1998). Similarly, we negated law enforcement and military personnel because we believed that perceptions of these individuals are much more complex and both categories are frequently portrayed as overly heroic and are all too often the antagonists.⁶

A coding instrument was developed to collect data to address our research questions. We compiled information on a film's genre by relying on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb)⁷ and recording the first genre label assigned to each film. Demographic characteristics included sex, age, ethnicity, and nationality of each civil servant. The type of civil servants was determined by coding the agency or job duties of the civil servant. Character attributes and actions were coded in an open-ended manner and included adjectives that were used by other characters in the film to describe the civil servants and their actions or practices. Finally, the coding instrument asked for an overall assessment of government (positive or negative) along with an explanation, and the names and descriptions of protagonists and antagonists.

Undergraduate students were trained in our coding instrument and given a test of coding one movie to see if they could follow directions and use the coding instrument appropriately. Inter-coder reliability was adequate with slightly more than 10 percent, or 16 of the 150 films, coded by two different coders. Each movie was coded by two coders and we reconciled the discrepancies. A copy of the coding sheet is available in Appendix 1.

Our hypotheses for the research questions were:

- H1: Action films would make up the highest percentage of films with civil servants.
- H2: The depiction of government (in general) would be negative in these films.
- H3: The demographic features of the civil servants depicted in the films would mirror the actual demographics of the civil service.
- H4: Locally based civil servants (teachers, district attorneys, etc.) would be more prevalent in these films because more people interact with these civil servants. After 9/11 we expected a rise in the number of civil servants in Homeland Security, CIA, Secret Service, and local fire fighters
- H5: Negative characteristics will be associated with the majority of civil servants depicted in these films. This would correspond with the negative image of civil servants discussed in the scholarly literature.
- H6: Civil servants will be depicted as not doing their jobs and/or engaging in corrupt, questionable, or negative behaviors.

⁶ Moreover, the portrayal of the military in film has also been frequently studied.

⁷ <http://www.imdb.com>; accessed 13 October 2009.

Background on Films

Genres

Before exploring the portrayal of government, first consider some general information about the 150 films studied, specifically movie genre. As was expected, just over half (51 percent) of the films in the sample are action and/or adventure films. Comedies comprise the next largest portion with 23 percent of the films. A more complete examination of the genres can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Films by Genres (N=150)

Genre	Percentage (N)
Action and/or Adventure	51.3 (77)
Comedy	23.3 (35)
Animation	10.7 (16)
Drama	6.7 (10)
Family	2.7 (4)
Miscellaneous Genres	5.3 (8)

While a complete list of the films examined in this study can be found in Appendix 2, a brief review of the list provides some general insights into the types of films most popular with moviegoers. Action/adventure films complete with superheroes (such as *Batman Begins* and *Spiderman*) and lots of special effects (such as *Pirates of the Caribbean* and the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy) are frequently among the top box office grossing films each year along with comedies that appeal to adult audiences (such as *Austin Powers* and *There's Something About Mary*) and comedies that are appropriate for families (such as *Cars* and *Shrek*). Typically these films depict attractive characters in roles that are easily classified as “good” or “bad.” These observations are not surprising given that the majority of moviegoers in the U.S. are under age 40. Only a handful of top-performing films at the box office provide more serious subject matter and lack the escapism that most of these films offer the audience (such as *Good Will Hunting* or the *Schindler's List*).

Out of the 150 films in our sample, 95 films included civil servants that were coded in this study. Stated differently, 63 percent of films contained at least one character that was a civil servant. This suggests that moviegoers had a good chance of seeing civil servants portrayed in film. In these 95 films, there were 303 civil servants with the following breakdown by genre (Table 2).

Table 2
Films with Civil Servants by Genres (N=95)

Genre	Percentage (N)
Action and/or Adventure	55.8 (53)
Comedy	22.1 (20)
Animation	12.6 (11)
Drama	5.3 (5)
Miscellaneous Genres	6.3 (6)

Most of the films (55.8 percent) that depicted civil servants were action and/or adventure movies, as expected. This pattern was even more prevalent in post-9/11 films: 60 percent of films in the post-9/11 period (2002-2006) were action and/or adventure films while during the pre-9/11 period, action and/or adventure films comprised 47 percent.

General Depictions of Government

We expected, and found, a negative depiction of government in general. Overall, out of 105 films that contained some depiction of government, 40 percent (N=42) of the films portrayed government as competent, efficient, and/or good, whereas 60 percent (N=63) depicted the government as inefficient, incompetent, and/or bad, and 3 percent were mixed. Some of the films that positively depicted government include *Cars*, *Cliffhanger*, *Speed*, and *Independence Day*. By contrast, *A Time to Kill*, *The Fugitive*, and *Pocahontas* portrayed government negatively. This pattern was similar for both pre-9/11 and post-9/11 time periods, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
General Depictions of Government (N=105)⁸

	Competent, Good, Efficient Government	Incompetent, Bad, Inefficient Government	Mixed Depiction
Films Released Pre-9/11 (1992-2001)	26 (38%)	41 (59%)	2 (3%)
Films Released Post-9/11 (2002-2006)	13 (36%)	22(61%)	1 (3%)

Further analysis finds that of the 63 films that depicted government as incompetent, bad, and/or inefficient, 67 percent of those films (N= 42) indicate that the negative portrayal of the government is because of the “system” rather than individuals. Numerous films are illustrative of this finding; for instance, the government is depicted as inefficient and incompetent in *Batman Begins* because they are unable to stem the crime wave sweeping Gotham City. The inability of the government to provide safety for its citizens ultimately compels Bruce Wayne to become Batman. In *Chicago*, Roxie gets away with her crimes because of the ineptitude of the criminal justice system.

By comparison, only a third of the films (N=21) that portrayed government in a negative light did so based on the actions of an individual or individuals. For example, in *Mrs. Doubtfire* Robin Williams’ character is denied custody of his children by a “mean judge” and is subjected to unfriendly child custody officials. In *Wayne’s World* several police officers are routinely ridiculed because of their behavior. These findings were not particularly striking to us since government is frequently ridiculed – by citizens, the media, and elected officials - as a collective. Indeed, we are frequently socialized in the U.S. to view the entire governmental system in a negative way.

⁸ The sample size is 105 because 45 films did not have a sufficient portrayal of government for the coders to assess government’s overall depiction.

The films that portrayed government positively were also studied to determine if the positive portrayal was a result of government as a whole or the result of individuals' actions. Unlike the negative depiction of government where the results were overwhelming in one category, these films were about evenly split between individuals and the governmental system being responsible for the positive depiction.

The depiction of government was also considered in light of the different film genres in our sample. Of the 77 action and/or adventure films, a majority (N=42) of them portrayed government negatively whereas the other two most common genres (comedy and animation) were evenly split in terms of how many of them portrayed government positively or negatively. One should not be too surprised to find that most action and/or adventure films portrayed government negatively as these films are most likely to have clear protagonists and antagonists. For instance, in *The Day After Tomorrow*, government foolishly ignores warnings of imminent, dramatic changes in the weather that are going to have catastrophic effects; or in *The Fugitive*, the government wrongfully convicts Richard Kimble in his wife's murder and resists Kimble's efforts to prove otherwise.

Civil Servants Depicted in Contemporary American Films

Demographics of Civil Servants

Three hundred and three civil servants representing a diverse array of characteristics were coded from the sample of 150 films. A comparison of the pre- and post-9/11 period shows that there were more civil servants depicted per film in the post-9/11 period. The average number of civil servants in the pre-9/11 period was 1.86 per movie and in the post-9/11 period there were 2.34 per movie. An overwhelming majority of the civil servants were male (84 percent, N=255). Moreover, 80 percent of the civil servants were Caucasian with African-American civil servants a distant second with 6 percent. The remaining 14 percent of civil servants ranged from Arab to Hispanic to penguins and apes (primarily in the animation films). Age was another characteristic we examined; we found that 50 percent of the civil servants coded were in their 30's or 40's with an additional 20 percent in their 50's. Although the ages of civil servants spanned from 20's to 100's, the vast majority were in their 30's to 50's. In addition to ethnicity, it is also interesting to note that 67 percent of the civil servants were Americans.

A frequent topic in public administration literature is whether or not the civil service is representative of the American citizenry; for our purposes, we have extended this inquiry to determine whether or not civil servants in our sample are representative of actual civil servants. Because of data limitations, we used statistics from the federal civil service only. Based on the most recent data from OPM (2004), the 303 civil servants in our study are not representative of the federal civil service. The ratio of male to female civil servants is much closer (56 percent male, 44 percent female) as compared to the disproportionately high number of male civil servants depicted in the movies (84 percent). In both the films and the federal civil service, Caucasians make up the largest ethnic group; however, in the federal civil service the figure is not quite as high (69 percent)

as compared to Hollywood’s depiction (80 percent). By contrast to the aforementioned demographics, age is the most accurately portrayed demographic characteristics in our sample. Forty-nine percent of federal civil servants are in their 30’s and 40’s, as compared to 50 percent of the civil servants in film. In sum, the civil servants portrayed in the films studied here are more frequently male and Caucasian than in the federal civil service.

After establishing the types of films included in this study and some demographics of the 303 civil servants, consider the types of civil servants most frequently portrayed and their behaviors.

Types of Civil Servants and Their Actions

A diverse assortment of civil servants is represented in the films in this study with no single type representing a majority of civil servants depicted.⁹ Teachers were the most frequent type of civil servant, accounting for approximately 13 percent (N=39) of all civil servants as hypothesized. Interestingly, a majority of the teachers were male (N=24); one might have expected a majority of teachers to be females. Members of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) represented about 10 percent and foreign intelligence officials about nine percent. As might be expected more than 80 percent of the C.I.A. officials and 88 percent of the foreign intelligence officials were male. Indeed, women did not dominate any category of common civil servants. This may not be too surprising since women were overwhelmingly outnumbered as civil servants (female civil servants N=47). In terms of types of civil servants pre and post 9/11, there were disproportionate majorities of C.I.A. officials, astronauts, White House staffers, and advisors to leaders in pre 9/11 films; no ready explanation accounts for these findings. Table 4 contains a more comprehensive look at the most common type of civil servants found in the sample of films.

Table 4
Common Types of Civil Servants Portrayed

Type	Percentage (N)
Teacher	12.9 (39)
Central Intelligence Agency	10.2 (31)
Foreign intelligence officials	8.6 (26)
First responders (e.g. EMS, fire fighters)	5.6 (17)
Astronauts	4.3 (13)
White House staffers	4.0 (12)
Advisors to leaders	3.6 (11)
Judges/Justices	3.6 (11)

Certain types of civil servants seemed to be common in films that portrayed government positively and negatively. For instance, a majority of C.I.A. officials (68 percent) can be found in films that depicted government in a negative manner. Films such as *Clear and Present Danger*, *Mission: Impossible*, and the Bourne films depict C.I.A. officials in movies that have a negative portrayal of government. In *The Bourne Supremacy*, former C.I.A. operative Jason Bourne is

⁹ The types of civil servants portrayed in the films reflect an inductive categorization rather than the use of an existing categorization.

ruthlessly hunted by his former employer. By contrast, 100 percent of the astronauts and 67 percent of the teachers were found in movies that showed government positively. For example, films such as *Apollo 13* and *Armageddon* revolved around heroic astronauts that were either displaying courage and patriotism during the Cold War or saving the planet from an imminent asteroid strike.

Characters' Attributes

While depictions of government were decidedly negative, this is not the case when individual civil servants are examined. As a first cut at determining whether or not individuals were depicted as positive or negative characters, we categorized the coding of each character generally. Specifically, we looked at the adjectives describing the character - such as brave, evil, professional, incompetent, and so forth - and the actions of each character - such as adhered to the law, took a bribe, etcetera. Coders were asked to write adjectives and describe a civil servant's behavior without prompting so that the coders would not be cued by a preconceived list of descriptors or actions. Then we categorized if the characters were depicted in a positive, negative, or neutral manner. Of 303 characters, 151, or 50 percent, were positively shown, 118 or 40 percent were negatively depicted, and 11 percent were not coded as either.¹⁰

The following breakdown in Table 5 shows the specific adjectives used to describe the characters. This list only represents the most important characteristics for which each character was coded. It does not, for example, suggest that all characters who might be seen as strict were coded as strict - if that was a minor or less important attribute as determined by the coders. This list should give a broad view of how characters were most generally portrayed.

Table 5
Attributes of Civil Servant Characters

Attribute	Percentage
Good looking/fit	19
Knowledgeable/wise/smart	18
Dangerous/evil/corrupt	14
Friendly/approachable	13
Professional/follows the rules	10
Serious/dedicated	9
Caring/loving	8
Strict/stern	8
Loyal/concerned	7
Fearful/cowardly	6
Authoritative/powerful	5
Frantic/hurried/nervous	5
Self-assured/arrogant	5
Brave/heroic	5
Funny/humorous	4
Organized/observant	3

¹⁰ Percentages add to 101 because of rounding.

Many of the civil servants portrayed in the film – especially those who were not the antagonists – were depicted as knowledgeable, friendly, and professional. Many civil servants were classified as good-looking, including Rachel Dawes in *Batman Begins*, foreign spies in *Goldeneye*, and numerous Secret Service agents in *Deep Impact*. We believe that the numbers of those categorized as good-looking and fit is due to the high number of firefighters, Secret Service, and astronauts in the sample - characters routinely portrayed in heroic or similar capacities. The individual civil servants depicted are, to a large degree, shown to be well trained, having expertise in a particular area, and willing and able to work professionally. For example, Will Smith’s Agent Jay in *Men in Black* proved to be smart and knowledgeable in tracking down aliens living among us and stopping those aliens intent on destroying the planet. By contrast, Harrison Ford’s Jack Ryan, in *Clear and Present Danger*, has to try and save U.S. personnel engaged in questionable operations in Columbia orchestrated by a corrupt and devious National Security Advisor. Despite this example, however, corruption is not a common depiction in the case of American civil servants, although foreign civil servants are sometimes shown to be corrupt (e.g. *Schindler’s List*). Judges are depicted as stern or strict more often than those in other occupations and teachers are often depicted as caring or kind (although there are some examples of teachers as uncaring). In *Finding Nemo*, Nemo’s teacher, Mr. Ray, is portrayed as friendly and caring. Doctors are often psychiatrists working for the state depicted as not as caring of their patients.

The breakdown of pre- versus post-9/11 films shows little difference the attributes of civil servant characters. In the pre-9/11 period, 52 percent of the depictions of civil servants were positively depicted and 35 percent were negatively depicted. The percentages in the post-9/11 period were 52 percent positive, 32 percent negative, and 16 percent neutral or not coded (see Table 6).

Table 6
Pre- and Post-9/11 Attributes of Civil Servant Characters

	Positive Attributes	Negative Attributes	Neutral or not coded
Pre-9/11	52%	35%	13%
Post-9/11	52%	32%	16%

Therefore, we observed little difference in depictions of civil servants post 9/11 as may have been expected with the increased sense of patriotism in the wake of the attacks. However, given production timelines and the limited number of films post 9/11, the sample of films may be too small to draw any definitive conclusions.

Discussion and Implications

Data from this sample of films fills a void in the literature and highlights some interesting findings. Overall, the general depictions of government are negative, in keeping with our hypotheses and the existing research on the portrayal of government in various narrative forms. Despite the increased sense of patriotism post-9/11, we found the pattern of depiction largely unchanged from the pre-

9/11 context.¹¹ As with other narrative forms, movie-going Americans could expect to see government portrayed as incompetent, inefficient, and bad when they go to the movies. As a result, we echo Holzer and Slater's (1995) concerns that films "...reinforcing an image of 'government as incompetent'... [may] help to undermine support for the public sector" (86). The casual depictions of government that citizens are exposed to in a variety of circumstances can affect citizens' perceptions of government, if we are to believe the literature on media effects. Thus, in our sample of contemporary movies, we are able to add another category to the list of narrative forms that portray government in a negative light. This conclusion is even more disturbing because of the wide range of Americans that watch movies, particularly the younger generations whose perceptions are more malleable. In addition, because the most popular movies primarily serve entertainment value, the audience may not be consciously aware of these depictions of government.

While the depictions of government in film were not surprising, we did not expect to find that civil servants were generally depicted as competent – and across such a wide array of types of civil servants. About half of the more than 300 civil servants coded in the films were positively depicted. Even more illuminating are the attributes of these characters, who were most often described as good-looking and knowledgeable. These attributes and depictions were found in a wide variety of films as opposed to a specific type of film, thereby increasing support for our finding. It is intriguing to discover that while government is generally portrayed poorly in recent films, the civil servants in those films are depicted more positively. In addition, there is little difference in the depiction of civil servants in the pre- and post-9/11 periods. Characteristics and demographics of civil servants remain fairly constant, for example. One difference is in the increase in the number of teachers and foreign ministry personnel in the post-9/11 period. We did not find an increase in spies or CIA officials. Civil servants were presented positively in both the pre- and post-9/11 period, while a negative depiction of government is evident in both periods as well.¹²

Several explanations may account for these findings. Perhaps the negative depictions of government stem from the actions of military officials and politicians rather than the civil servants themselves. As a result, civil servants in these films are forced to contend with a corrupt government that they are not – or not entirely – responsible for. Since politicians and military officials were excluded in our sample, we cannot say for certain if this explains our findings. Additional research on the depiction of politicians and military officials may shed light on this question. Another explanation may be that film and culture more generally take the lead from elite opinion and references to government or to general public opinion. Many political leaders, especially since President Ronald Reagan, have presented government as "the problem," and this may be reflected in the most popular films of the time. It would be interesting to see if this

¹¹ However, the conclusions regarding post-9/11 films should not be overstated for two key reasons. First, there were only five years of films (N=50) that fell into this category for analysis; and second, the pre-production timetable in Hollywood can be lengthy, so the effects of 9/11 may not impact Hollywood for years.

¹² Further study of how other characters are portrayed in films is needed to provide comparison data for civil servants and their attributes in these films. To better understand if the depictions of civil servants are particularly positive, we need to be able to compare their depiction to that of other categories of individuals.

changes under President Barack Obama and a more pragmatic presentation of government's abilities to solve problems – particularly after the perceived lack of governmental oversight's contribution to the financial collapse of 2008-2009.

Given these mixed findings, we may have found additional empirical support for a phenomenon Goodsell (2004) notes. Goodsell found that while the dominant view of government that Americans hold is very negative, their day-to-day interactions with government are typically quite positive. We found that while government is generally depicted negatively in movies, closer inspection of the characters reveals more positive attributes. Therefore, like the average American who on the surface thinks government is bad and actually finds his/her interactions with government to be positive, film may generally portray government poorly, but the individual government characters are more positively depicted.

Research regarding how various narrative forms portray government and more specifically civil servants is generally lacking. Yet with the significant role that entertainment, particularly movies, plays in the lives of many Americans, we should be interested in this area of study. It has been duly noted that our perceptions of government are affected by a range of narrative forms, and in our sample of contemporary American films we find that government is generally portrayed negatively. While most civil servants are portrayed positively, many are portrayed negatively and the government as a whole is presented in a negative light as well. Thus, we must raise concerns similar to those of Holzer and Slater (1995) who assert that negative depictions can lead to negative perceptions of government and civil servants. Perhaps Hollywood will strive for a more accurate portrayal of government and civil servants in the future; however, that seems unlikely as we often look to movies for an idealized version of reality – an escape. Thus, close-ups may be even more contrived than Norma Desmond's elaborate descent down the palace staircase.¹³

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¹³ For those readers who have not seen Billy Wilder's classic Hollywood-on-Hollywood film, aging silent screen star Norma Desmond believes (in the final scene of the film when she utters her famous line) that she is shooting her next film with Cecil B. DeMille, rather than being arrested on homicide charges.

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Appendix 1 – Coding Instrument

Coding Sheet: Film Analysis

Coder _____

Date _____

Film Title: _____

Year: _____ Genre (leave blank): _____

Setting Description: _____

Civil Servant Character # _____:

Character Description: _____

Character Name (if known) _____

American?: Yes No Don't Know

If No, country or place if identifiable): _____

Level of Government: Local State National

Other _____ Unsure

Department/Ministry/Service: _____

Race: _____

Sex: Female Male

Age: _____

Other Notable Physical Attributes: _____

Adjectives used to describe Character: _____

Actions/Practices of Character: _____

Antagonist Name and Description _____

Nationality _____

Protagonist Name and Description _____

Nationality _____

How is the government depicted?

Efficient/competent/good: (circle and explain) __

Inefficient/incompetent/bad: (circle and explain)

N/A

Description of Coding Sheet

Film Title: *refers to the full name of the film*

Year: *refers to the year that the film was one of the top box office earners*

Genre: leave blank. *Profs. Pautz or Roselle will insert.*

Setting Description: *refers to the time and place of the action. For example, a mythical boarding school called Hogwarts in the late 20th- early 21st century.*

Civil Servant Character # _____: *Number each civil servant character sequentially as you view them in the film.*

Civil Servants include the following: government officials that are not elected and are not military or law enforcement officers. This includes characters identified as bureaucrats, ministry officials, 'government officials', etc.

Character Description: *Describe the character's appearance, personality, characteristics.*

Name (if known): *Include all names associated with this character – even nicknames. If the character is referred to by more than one name or nickname please indicate who calls the character which name/nickname.*

American?: Yes No Don't Know

If No, country or place if identifiable): _____

Circle yes if the character is clearly an American. No, if not, and don't know if unsure or unclear. Identify the character's country or place if you can – even if the entity is fictional (ie made up)

Level of Government: Local State National

Other _____ Unsure

Department/Ministry/Service: _____

Identify the level of government with which the character is associated and the specific department/ministry/service. Do this as best you can. Note the department or ministry even if the film is set in a fictional place – such as the Ministry of Magic – if you can.

Demographics:

Race: Indicate the ethnic background of the character, such as African American, Asian, Hispanic, or Caucasian.

Sex: Male Female

Age: Approximate the age of the character, such as mid 30's, or note any specific reference to the character's age.

Other Physical Attributes: Note any particular physical attributes of the character, such as a nerdy individual with outdated clothing or a specific disability.

Adjectives used to describe _____

Note the adjectives used by others to describe this character AND who said each in parentheses after the adjective.

For example:

The character was described as incompetent by the criminal.

The character was described as efficient by the mother.

Actions/Practices of the Character _____

Note the actions or practices of the character. What does this character do in the movie?

For example:

This character implements a decision made by the Prime Minister that restricts access to information.

Antagonist Name and Description _____

Nationality _____

The antagonist is the principal opponent of the main character (or hero). Please describe this character and how s/he is depicted. In particular, note if there is anything you would consider to be stereotypical about how the antagonist is presented.

Protagonist Name and Description _____

Nationality _____

The protagonist is the the main character (or hero). Please describe this character and how s/he is depicted. In particular, note if there is anything you would consider to be stereotypical about how the antagonist is presented.

How is the government depicted?

Efficient/competent/good: (circle and explain)

Circle this if the government (in general) is portrayed as efficient or able to handle problems or issues. Explain in a few sentences the evidence for your coding on this.

Inefficient/incompetent/bad: (circle and explain)

Circle this if the government (in general) is portrayed as inefficient or unable to handle problems or issues. Governmental corruption and incompetence would fall here. Explain in a few sentences the evidence for your coding on this.

N/A

Circle this if you are not sure or this does not apply to the film you are coding.

Appendix 2 – List of Films

Top Grossing Films of Each Year		
Year	Film	Box Office (U.S.) (in millions)
2006	Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest	\$423
	Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe	\$291
	Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	\$289
	Cars	\$244
	X-Men: The Last Stand	\$234
	King Kong	\$218
	The DaVinci Code	\$217
	Superman Returns	\$200
	Ice Age 2: The Meltown	\$195
	Happy Feet	\$178
	2005	Star Wars: Episode III The Revenge of the Sith
Meet the Fockers		\$279
The Incredibles		\$261
War of the Worlds		\$234
The Wedding Crashers		\$209
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory		\$206
Batman Begins		\$205
Madagascar		\$193
Mr. and Mrs. Smith		\$186
Hitch		\$177
2004	Shrek 2	\$436
	Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	\$377
	Spider-Man 2	\$373
	The Passion of the Christ	\$370
	Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl	\$305
	Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	\$249
	The Day After Tomorrow	\$186
	The Bourne Supremacy	\$176
	Elf	\$173
	I, Robot	\$144
2003	Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	\$340
	Finding Nemo	\$339
	Star Wars: Episode II - The Attack of the Clones	\$310
	The Matrix Reloaded	\$281
	Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	\$261
	Bruce Almighty	\$242
	My Big Fat Greek Wedding	\$241
	Signs	\$227
	X2: X-Men United	\$214
	Chicago	\$170

2002	Spider-Man	\$403
	Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone	\$317
	Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring	\$313
	Monsters, Inc.	\$255
	Austin Powers in Goldmember	\$213
	Men in Black II	\$190
	Ocean's Eleven	\$183
	Planet of the Apes	\$180
	Ice Age	\$176
	A Beautiful Mind	\$170
2001	Shrek	\$267
	Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas	\$260
	Cast Away	\$233
	Rush Hour 2	\$226
	The Mummy Returns	\$202
	Pearl Harbor	\$198
	Gladiator	\$187
	What Women Want	\$185
	Jurassic Park 3	\$181
	Meet the Parents	\$166
2000	Star Wars: Episode I The Phantom Menace	\$431
	The Sixth Sense	\$293
	Toy Story 2	\$245
	Mission: Impossible 2	\$215
	The Perfect Storm	\$182
	Tarzan	\$171
	X-Men	\$157
	Scary Movie	\$156
	Runaway Bride	\$152
	Stuart Little	\$140
1999	Saving Private Ryan	\$216
	Austin Powers II: The Spy Who Shagged Me	\$205
	There's Something About Mary	\$176
	The Matrix	\$171
	Big Daddy	\$163
	A Bug's Life	\$162
	The Waterboy	\$161
	The Mummy	\$155
	Doctor Dolittle	\$144
	Rush Hour	\$141
1998	Titanic	\$600
	Men in Black	\$250
	Armageddon	\$201
	Air Force One	\$172
	As Good As It Gets	\$147
	Deep Impact	\$140

	Good Will Hunting	\$138
	Godzilla	\$136
	Lethal Weapon 4	\$129
	My Best Friend's Wedding	\$126
1997	Star Wars: Episode VI - The Return of the Jedi	\$252
	The Lost World: Jurassic Park	\$229
	Liar Liar	\$181
	Jerry Maguire	\$153
	Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope	\$138
	Ransom	\$136
	101 Dalmations	\$136
	Face/Off	\$112
	Batman & Robin	\$107
	The First Wives Club	\$105
1996	Independence Day	\$306
	Twister	\$241
	Toy Story	\$191
	Mission: Impossible	\$180
	The Rock	\$133
	The Nutty Professor	\$128
	The Birdcage	\$123
	A Time to Kill	\$108
	Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls	\$108
	Goldeneye	\$105
1995	Forrest Gump	\$329
	The Lion King	\$312
	Batman Forever	\$183
	Apollo 13	\$171
	True Lies	\$146
	The Santa Clause	\$144
	Pocahontas	\$141
	Dumb & Dumber	\$127
	Clear and Present Danger	\$122
	The Mask	\$119
1994	Jurassic Park	\$356
	Mrs. Doubtfire	\$219
	The Fugitive	\$183
	The Flintstones	\$130
	Sleepless in Seattle	\$126
	Speed	\$121
	Maverick	\$101
	The Pelican Brief	\$100
	Parenthood	\$100
	Schindler's List	\$95
1993	Aladdin	\$217
	Home Alone 2	\$172

	Indecent Proposal	\$165
	The Firm	\$158
	A Few Good Men	\$141
	Sister Act	\$139
	The Bodyguard	\$121
	In the Line of Fire	\$102
	Unforgiven	\$101
	Cliffhanger	\$84
1992	Terminator 2: Judgement Day	\$204
	Batman Returns	\$162
	Beauty and the Beast	\$144
	Lethal Weapon 3	\$144
	Wayne's World	\$121
	Hook	\$118
	Basic Instinct	\$117
	The Addams Family	\$113
	A League of their Own	\$107
	Father of the Bride	\$89

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