

2007 June 01

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A FEW GOOD MEN __ (1992)_9/10

A morality play that hits on all cylinders

Written by Aaron Sorkin

Directed by Rob Reiner

Tom Cruise ...	Lt. Daniel Kaffee
Jack Nicholson ...	Col. Nathan R. Jessep
Demi Moore ...	Lt. Cdr. JoAnne Galloway
Kevin Bacon ...	Capt. Jack Ross
Kiefer Sutherland ...	Lt. Jonathan Kendrick
Kevin Pollak ...	Lt. Sam Weinberg
Wolfgang Bodison ...	Lance Cpl. Harold W. Dawson
James Marshall ...	Pfc. Loudon Downey
J.T. Walsh ...	Lt. Col. Matthew Andrew Markins

"Harold, you don't need to wear a patch on your arm to have honor." — Lt. Daniel Kaffee

What's special, or even topical, about this movie is it speaks to how military honor can be so readily suborned by the authoritarian impulse. And second, how the same honest pride—not to mention competence—is necessary to bring such posturing would-be tyrants to justice.

No, I'm not going to launch into another angled criticism of the Bushoviks; but the facts are apropos: in the name of a notion of high-minded military protection the Cheney-Bush Oil Junta (CBOJ) performs criminal acts of the highest, deadliest, and most treasonable nature.

CBOJ's acts are much worse in scale than what Colonel Nathan Jessep (Jack Nicholson in an Academy Award-winning role) is ultimately accused of, which is ordering a "Code Red" that winds up killing a Marine in his barracks on Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (Gitmo). But what he's accused of is of the same essence, bred of the same perverse conceit of absolute power.

This movie originates from a stage play of the same name by the same author, and it's based on actual events. A young, Judge Advocate General Corps (JAG) Lieutenant Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise) intends to coast thru his service time playing softball and pleading cases (so they don't have to go to trial). Nonetheless, his higher ups select him to defend two Marines charged with a hazing death at Gitmo.

It's an important case to Lieutenant Commander JoAnne Galloway (Demi Moore), who feels many of the explanations don't add up. Though an attorney with an elevated position in what is the Navy's version of internal affairs, she lacks the confidence and acumen of Kaffee—son of a famous trial attorney who had a decorated career in the Marines.

Kaffee is supremely capable as a trial attorney, yet is immature, hiding a deep anxiety that he can never measure up to his late father. This is the basis for character development as the plot moves forward. Lt. Weinberg (Kevin Pollak) is appointed to assist Kaffee, and provide a nice comic balance to the grueling Marine Corps gravitas.

The three attorneys travel to Gitmo, interview several officers and enlisted men: Jessep, his CO Lt. Col. Matthew Andrew Markins (J.T. Walsh), and Jessep's true henchman on the base Lt. Jonathan Kendrick (Kiefer Sutherland). Markins has some information that would suggest that the two accused men, Lance Cpl. Harold W. Dawson (Wolfgang Bodison) and Pfc. Loudon Downey (James Marshall), acted under orders.

The movie adds some footage of the gritty surroundings of the Guantanamo base but otherwise you see courtrooms and the settings of a first-class play. As usual, Nicholson—"You can't handle the truth!"—is a show-stealer, but Cruise is no slouch. Demi Moore is fine, but the overkill boob job is a bit jarring. Do Hollywood starlets really feel most men like breasts the size of cantaloupes?

Kevin Bacon is competent and believable as Captain Jack Ross, the prosecutor assigned to the case.

Without revealing the ending or even key events leading up to the ending, I want to say A Few Good Men has a deep message... actually expressed in the quote I've used to begin this review. The movie is all about

the code of honor, or simply honor: what is it, who cherishes it, who pretends to have it, and who truly achieves it.

Let me further that thought by repeating a quote I first heard from Mr. Howard Wooldridge as he courageously delivered his message on the moral necessity of ridding our country of from the gross authoritarianism of drug prohibition. It's about assuming the honor of patriotism:

In times of change, the Patriot is a scarce man; brave, hated and scorned. When his cause succeeds, however, the timid join him, for then it costs nothing to be a Patriot. — Mark Twain

At any rate that's what went through my mind considering that scene. Honor and heroism pertain to the brave soldier, certainly, but even more so to the brave citizen-patriot who would wrest power away from tyrants. That's the positive message I'm taking away from this film I saw fittingly on Memorial Day, in quiet homage to my father and to my brother, both veterans, both honorable, and both patriots.