

## PAPER TRAIL

This is a book about how hard it is to tell the truth about an iconic American figure. It is the story of how I uncovered the truth behind the myth of the great film director Frank Capra. It is a book about publishing and the First Amendment and a cautionary tale of what can go wrong with that most cherished of our freedoms. *Frankly: Unmasking Frank Capra* is a chronicle of corruption and venality on the part of people who tried to stop a book from being published. It is also the story of how I eventually managed to find an honest and sympathetic publisher for my 1992 biography, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*, in the face of fierce opposition.

In a sense, the previously untold story you are reading is Volume Two of my biography of Capra. By donating his papers to Wesleyan University in Connecticut and letting me interview him, Capra tried fitfully in his later years to reveal some of the truth about the myth he had created about himself with the help of credulous admirers in the media. I had been one of those admirers and had co-written a television special honoring him with the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award. But I became disillusioned when I learned the truth and set out to write an accurate, three-dimensional, unflinching portrait of a major artist who did not live up to the ideals he espoused in his films. This book takes you behind the scenes of my battle with Capra's protectors as they colluded to perpetuate the myth I was in the process of dismantling. The biography took seven years and a half years of work, much of which was consumed by the legal fight to get the book to the public.

When my biography was published by Simon & Schuster, a writer who interviewed me for the New York *Times*, Joseph A. Cincotti, told me it was "quite herculean. It's a great story and a scoop — a fifty-year scoop. A great American saga. I can't say enough about the research of the book. No one's going to touch the subject for thirty years." But while I was writing the book, I knew I was in deep trouble when the editor who had originally acquired it at the publishing firm of Alfred A. Knopf, the

celebrated Robert Gottlieb, told me, “You know it all — you may know too much. You will regret you ever met me. The Slasher will go to work.”

My antagonists, who also included Wesleyan University archivist Jeanine Basinger (as of 2019, “Special Advisor to the President” of the university and past “Co-Curator and Founder” of its cinema archives, now the Ogden and Mary Louise Reid Cinema Archives), were a small but powerful group of people. They joined in a compromised relationship to protect Capra’s false reputation as an American icon, their own self-interests, and their own reputations. It is gratifying to record that once I managed to escape Knopf and its parent company, Random House, there was, finally, a receptive audience for my revelations about what an American tragedy Capra’s life actually was and how little it resembled the naively inspirational Horatio Alger story he and the media had spent many years concocting to fool the public.

*Frankly: Unmasking Frank Capra* is an often bizarre, sometimes darkly comical, agonizing saga with many rollercoaster highs and lows, as wildly fluctuating as those in a Capra movie. The corruption I faced from a leading publisher and a prestigious university involves people whose work in those institutions has falsely inflated their reputations. This story of the attempted suppression of a book might be hard to believe in a country that prides itself on the freedom of the press enshrined in its Bill of Rights. But in these carefully documented pages you will be able to take a close look at how much we have to fight to uphold that principle. I was able to tell the story in such minute, revealing detail because of the paper trail I recorded, the wealth of documentation I preserved in many boxes of papers during the years of researching and writing the biography and unrelentingly carrying on the legal campaign.

This book you are reading is largely what I was working on during the more than four years of that period that were consumed with trying to get the biography published. This sequel to my Capra biography is a way of looking at his life from a different angle, a chronicle of his and others’ attempts to try to control his life story and image. The stakes were high, for they involved perpetuating the self-aggrandizing falsehoods Capra spread to protect himself from exposure as a fraudulent hero, and many people to this day prefer to worship the myth rather than know the truth about

the man. In addition to relating the inside story of how a biographer sometimes has to fight to get the truth out, I offer in *Unmasking Frank Capra* many fresh insights, observations, and comments by Capra that I have turned up in the course of my research and interviewing process. The perspective of looking back over those events, and Capra's life, more than twenty-five years after the book's publication has been illuminating for me and should provide valuable new insights into Capra and the pitfalls involved in writing truthful biographies. Barry Gewen's review of my Capra biography in the *New York Times Book Review* noted that Capra's acclaimed 1971 autobiography, *The Name Above the Title*, "appears to have been a lie practically from beginning to end. *Frank Capra* is in one sense a 768-page corrective to the false impressions it gave." And with a nod to Orson Welles's film *F for Fake*, another meditation on lying, an early working title for this meta-story you are reading was *The Book About the Book*.

I thank my lawyer, the late Maurice L. Muehle, and my brother Michael McBride, also an attorney, for recommending that I keep a meticulous paper trail and chronology of how the struggle progressed with Random House and Wesleyan University in Connecticut, whose Cinema Archives houses the Frank Capra Archives. Mike gave me invaluable advice in the early stages. And without Maury's legal mastery and unshakable integrity, my biography of Capra would never have been published by Simon & Schuster.

My wife, Dr. Ruth O'Hara, who was at my side throughout the ordeal, is the hero of this story. Her unbending support and her brilliant strategizing, both legal and psychological, ultimately enabled the three of us to triumph over what was then the nation's largest publishing company, Random House. In the original acknowledgments I wrote for the biography, which is also dedicated to Ruth, I wrote, "She sometimes joked that someone must have heard me in the early stages of this book and sent her down to be the guardian angel to my George Bailey; I'm here to say that this is one angel who really earned her wings." Since "The better part of valor is discretion," I decided the published edition should not include that indication of how desperate the struggle became and what a toll the book took on us. But I kept part of what I originally wrote, adding a comment about the extent of her contributions that was necessarily somewhat cryptic under the circumstances:

“Even while my wife, Ruth O’Hara, was in the process of completing her own Ph.D. program [in Experimental Psychology at the University of Southern California], she devoted her formidable strength of character to all of the tasks involved in this book, both practical and conceptual. She was my live-in editor, and only she knows how much more. Until I married her, I never believed an author who wrote that he couldn’t have written a book without his wife’s support. Now I know what that means.”

Now I can explain more. At one point, I offered to let Ruth share the writing credit on *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*, but Ruth modestly demurred, pointing out that I had written it myself. Yes, but so much of her is in that book as well, from ideas and criticism to editing and, indeed, its sheer survival. That would not have occurred but for her brilliance in psychological and legal strategizing and her fierce determination that a book should not be destroyed. Ruth is now an internationally prominent research psychologist and a professor and associate chair in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University.

Bob Bender, my honest and skillful editor at Simon & Schuster, and Felice Einhorn, the strong and sympathetic attorney who handled the book there, believed in the book and made it a reality. I also thank St. Martin’s Griffin and my editor there, Tim Bent, for publishing the 2000 edition (revised and updated with additional documents obtained from the federal government through the Freedom of Information Act) and the University Press of Mississippi for keeping the book in print since 2011, along with my *Steven Spielberg: A Biography* and *Searching for John Ford*. It is satisfying to have all three biographies under their congenial roof.

Other people who rallied to my side during the 1984-92 period are gratefully acknowledged within these pages and in the considerably longer acknowledgments of the Capra biography itself. It truly took a community to support. One person whose name does not appear in that chronicle came into my life later, my loving and always supportive partner, Ann Weiser Cornell. Ann has been integral in enabling me to tell this story of the making of the biography and its attempted unmaking. A fellow writer and teacher, she shared my belief that it was a story I needed to tell, and she helped me greatly in working my way through what otherwise could have been a painful rather than liberating experience.

I am also grateful for the support of my colleagues in the School of Cinema at San Francisco State University, where I am now a professor. Thanks as well to the Wisconsin Historical Society, which houses and maintains my papers, including those for *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (and will eventually have all the legal and editing files I am using for *Frankly: Unmasking Frank Capra*). The Historical Society has a commendable policy of openness for researchers, believing strongly in public access to papers for scholars, in stark contrast to the restrictive dealings of the Wesleyan Cinema Archives with my book. I gratefully acknowledge the University of Wisconsin Cinematheque and Hillsdale (Michigan) College, which invited me to speak on topics that I've incorporated into the final chapter of this book: "Writing Directors' Lives: How Biography Illuminates Filmmakers' Work" (2010) and "Capra: Life and Times" (2015; that lecture appeared on YouTube). Additional thoughts have been drawn from my responses to questions as part of a symposium in the film magazine *Cineaste*, "The Art and Craft of Film Biography," Vol. 38, No. 3 (Summer 2013). Dorothy Alexander, an archivist at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., was helpful in enabling me to study the files of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 2018. For this book, I am also grateful for the always-helpful research assistance of Barbara Hall; the artful design and layout by Maggie Hurley; and the expert indexing by Silvia Benvenuto.

I quote extensively from the notes I kept of my telephone conversations and meetings with my antagonists on the Capra biography — the publishing firm of Alfred A. Knopf and its parent company Random House, Connecticut's Wesleyan University and its Cinema Archives, and members of the Capra family — and from my letters to them and to my lawyers and my memoranda for my files. But I do not quote from correspondence sent to me by those on the other side. This is not because I wanted to deny them their voices. Instead, as my legal adversary at Random House advised me at the time, I summarize those documents, as I had to do with many of Capra's papers I was not allowed to quote in the biography. That is due to the unfavorable copyright rulings imposed on writers of nonfiction by federal courts while I was writing this book and fighting to get it published. Those rulings damaged the freedom of the press and helped give Random House an excuse to block this book for years. But I am able to summarize the gist of the correspondence from those parties in ways that should convey clearly what their positions were and why

they maintained them so fixedly. And it is in the minutely detailed, often day-to-day texture of my notes (whose fullness and precision benefited from my newspaper training) and my recollections of events from a longer perspective that the full story can be told. Only a few people in this book appear under pseudonyms, which are acknowledged as such in the text; the principal dramatis personae are all identified by name, and their deeds, some at odds with their public images, are made explicit.

When I told this story of my problems with the Capra biography at the time to a distinguished fellow author, a future winner of the Pulitzer Prize, he said, “This is the most bizarre story I ever heard. The worst thing I ever heard. . . . Offending Frank Capra is the least of it. It’s a real mystery. I’ve never heard a story like this.”

For strategic reasons, I had to keep the story a secret all through the seven and a half years involved in the writing of the biography and the ensuing legal battle. It feels liberating to get it off my chest. To paraphrase a famous speech, “At long last I am able to say a few words of my own. I have never wanted to withhold anything, but until now it has not been possible for me to speak.” I tell this disturbing and hopefully enlightening story to document how I managed to tell Capra’s story without any essential compromise, if at considerable cost, and to show what writers sometimes have to go through to tell the truth about our public figures. For this is also a book about how our legal system does and does not protect writers and how authors can be betrayed by corrupt and pusillanimous publishers and archivists. I suspect there are more such stories that never reach the eyes of the public, some as outrageous as this one. The survival of our freedom depends on fiercely protecting the right to know the truth about our public figures and defending our precious right of free expression.

Joseph McBride

Berkeley, California

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## INTRODUCTION:

### BITTER TEA

“If a man is to write *A Panegyrick*, he may keep vices out of sight; but if he professes to write *A Life*, he must represent it really as it was.”

— Dr. Samuel Johnson

My discovery that Capra was not the man I thought he was came nine years before I started work on his biography. It was over lunch at a posh country club near Palm Springs, California, during our first meeting in April 1975. I was twenty-seven years old and on self-assignment for the Hollywood trade paper *Daily Variety*. I went to the desert to interview Capra on the state of contemporary filmmaking as well as to gather material for his advance obituary. It was my practice in my early days in Hollywood to seek out and interview every venerable director I admired. I was fortunate that many of the masters of the Golden Age were still around, and Capra was among those who meant the most to me, because I was enthralled by his mythic image as an idealistic, combative filmmaker who made films about “ordinary” people beating the system.

A gargantuan American flag was my first sight as I approached Capra’s modern, single-storey stone ranch house at 49280 Avenida Fernando in La Quinta, twenty miles from Palm Springs. The ostentatious patriotic display struck me as characteristic of the man, but the level of exaggeration took me aback. The flag was so large it almost dwarfed the house itself. The glaring sunlight blasting off the whiteness of the ranch house staggered me further. Capra’s home was on the eighteenth fairway of the La Quinta Country Club’s golf course, with the Santa Rosa Mountains on the horizon.

Capra emerged with a broad grin, charming as all get-out. He was the picture of bustle and pent-up energy. This was a director who hadn't made a film in more than a decade but had plenty to say about his forced inactivity and ample time to burnish his reputation. As usual, his public face was fixed for the benefit of a member of the press, which he so assiduously cultivated throughout his career to promote himself and his dubious "one man, one film" theory, a prototype of the auteur theory that the director is the person primarily responsible for a film, whether he/she has written it or not.

Though decked out that Sunday morning in a gaudy leisure suit with ultra-wide lapels — *de rigueur* in that retirement community in those years — Capra's weathered face and squat, hardy physique made his immigrant origins stand out unmistakably in the opulent surroundings. As the man who became the cinema's foremost waver of the United States flag told the audience at the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award tribute I later co-wrote, Francesco Capra had been "born a peasant ... in Bisacquino, Sicily." Capra on first meeting was instantly likeable. His infectious smile revealed a pleasingly youthful line of gleaming teeth; it was a practiced grin, but one that seemed to radiate sincerity and warmth. (And yet one of his most perceptive high school classmates, Josephine "Joe" Daniels Doolittle, told me she always regarded his smile as "a withholding.") Although strikingly handsome in his younger days, Capra was gnarled and gnomish in old age, barely five-foot-five, and I towered over him. He had the dark olive complexion of his native land, deep ridges around his eyes, mottled cheeks, an ample mouth, a bulbous nose, a salt-and-pepper mustache, black bushy eyebrows, and tufts of shaggy white hair sticking out behind and among his outsized ears. His oversized glasses hung by a metal cord from his neck.

Capra's large inquisitive brown eyes studied his listener intently, betraying hints of insecurity behind the overall impression of knock-that-chip-off-my-shoulder swagger. That point of vulnerability helped make him appealing as well as enigmatic. His legs were spindly in contrast to his barrel chest, and he talked in a fast-paced patter, stuttering excitedly, his words often stumbling over each other, a trait attributable in part to old age but also to the fact that English was his second language. As John Sanford, a writer who worked on the *Why We Fight* series of U.S. government documentaries in World War II, told me, Capra spoke to him and his fellow writers

“in halting terms, because he is not a good speaker. ... Capra, as I knew him, was rather timid and rather an inarticulate fellow.”

I remembered that when I had first seen a picture of Capra when I became a film buff in the late 1960s, I had been surprised by his folksy, peasant features — somehow I had expected him to look like the lanky WASP heroes through whom he projected his personality onscreen, like Gary Cooper or Jimmy Stewart. Capra tended to denigrate his own appearance and use motion pictures to present what he considered a more ideally American aspect and personality. Much of that probably was a subconscious process. But before we met, I had no idea how wrong I was in thinking I knew who he really was, or indeed in assuming he knew who he was. Now that I was in Capra's presence, I could sense more of the complexities and contradictions of this immigrant whose life had come to symbolize the American Dream. As John Cassavetes memorably put it, “Maybe there really wasn't an America, maybe it was only Frank Capra.” I eventually came to understand what a double-edged remark that was.

Then there was Mrs. Capra, standing quietly in the driveway. A reticent adjunct to her brash husband, a WASP born into a wealthy California farming family, Lucille, known as Lu, had married him in 1932. She now was as frail as Frank was still husky. She suffered from emphysema from her years of smoking five packs of cigarettes a day; at her funeral service at St. Francis of Assisi church in La Quinta, her priest, Father Peter Brennan, spoke of the “loneliness” she had endured during her long, isolating decline. She moved cautiously, and her face was gaunt and sunken. But her eyes glistened, and she smiled gently, inspiring protective affection.

Capra ushered me to a golf cart, his preferred means of locomotion at the age of almost seventy-eight. After some perfunctory chatter with Mrs. Capra, I made an inane remark I wish I could have taken back — “Well, it's a wonderful life.” Her smile remained fixed, but there was a baffled look in her eyes; she seemed to be wondering at such a clueless comment from a young admirer of her complex husband. We sped off in the cart for our lunch in that expensively underpopulated desert community, with its sprawling green lawns gleaming out of the desert. Mrs. Capra looked forlorn as she went back into the house.

Capra told me the outsized flag announcing their occupancy of the house had been a gift of Walt Disney, and that it had flown over the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. I sensed that flying that absurdly oversized flag was a sign of Capra's insecurity over whether he was a true American. He was always trying to prove he belonged in his adopted country, even though he had come to be regarded as a spokesman for American values. His films, once derided as "Capracorn," a word he eagerly adopted to describe them himself, now were widely regarded as the essence of American life transmuted into popular art. His sentimental, heartwarming Americana — such classic films as *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *It's a Wonderful Life* — told stories of uncommon common men and gutsy, usually independent women triumphing over adversity and class prejudice. They did so through a combination of old-fashioned pluck and innocence, or sometimes with brash streetwise guile. Often with Capra, and his characters, it was hard to tell where innocence and cynicism began, ended, or intersected.

"The happy ending is a national characteristic," Capra declared in a U.S. government document while serving as a propagandist during the Cold War. Wrapping everything up with a neat, upbeat flourish was integral to the ideology of American exceptionalism he had bought into as a young immigrant climbing the social ladder in the early twentieth century and came to serve so assiduously. The stories he told onscreen take you on an emotional rollercoaster but tend toward abruptly upbeat finales. Those endings are joyous or dubious, depending on your point of view, although two of his films (*The Way of the Strong* and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*) actually end with the male lead committing suicide — three, if you count George Bailey being rescued by an angel from killing himself in *Wonderful Life*, or four, if you add the original ending Capra shot for *Meet John Doe*. The critic William S. Pechter observed of *It's a Wonderful Life* in 1962 that "for those who can accept the realities of George Bailey's situation ... and do not believe in angels ... the film ends, in effect, with the hero's suicide. ... Capra's desperation is his final honesty. It ruthlessly exposes his own affirmation as pretense."

The dark moods Capra's films often fell into were not as recognized as integral to his work as its feel-good aspects. Few Capra fans even seemed consciously aware of the depressive counterpoint to his films' manic side. The buoyant, sometimes forced

optimism that dominated his stories and carried the day for his heroes captivated many moviegoers looking for uplift and willing to ignore his, and America's, more troubled and contradictory side. But the more perceptive observers sensed the darker, depressive side of Capra and his work. As the critic Stephen Handzo wrote in 1972, "One can find the wild oscillations of euphoria and despair of Capra's films in his own life. . . . Violent shifts of mood give his films the sense of life being lived." I have always valued his work for that complexity of mood, which I recognize in my own life and was attracted to study in the twin poles of Capra's artistic personality. At his best, as the French director and critic François Truffaut wrote in an 1974 essay entitled "Frank Capra, The Healer," "He was a navigator who knew how to steer his characters into the deepest dimensions of desperate human situations (I have often wept during the tragic moments of Capra's comedies) before he reestablished a balance and brought off the miracle that let us leave the theater with a renewed confidence in life." I was susceptible to that "miracle" — and still am after writing my iconoclastic biography. In fact, I appreciate Capra's films even more today, because I understand more fully where they came from and what accounts for their fascinating complexities and contradictions. Their flaws are inextricable from their qualities, as I would find to be true of his life as well — and perhaps of all of our lives.

The special quality of his work, which came to be called "Capraesque," made the elderly director into a born-again folk hero, even a spiritual guru for many of his more fervent admirers. His files of fan letters are filled with pleas for spiritual guidance from people who treated him as a guru, mistaking *Wonderful Life* for a simply heartwarming fable, or placed their faith in his almost entirely fictitious autobiography, *The Name Above the Title*. Capra's latterday celebrity, thanks to that 1971 "autohagiography" (as Elliott Stein called it in his unusually skeptical and acerbic *Sight and Sound* review, "Capra Counts His Oscars") provided the director with an improbable third-act triumph worthy of one of his own films. It was achieved after a long, terrible slide from the peak of his profession to post-World War II failure and prolonged unemployment. I was taken with *The Name Above the Title* when I first read it in 1971. I bought a copy at Larry Edmunds Book Store in Hollywood and showed it to Peter Bogdanovich on the set of Orson Welles's *The Other Side of the Wind*, in which we were both acting. Paging through it, he said, "No filmography." A shrewd observation, for I later spent a long time compiling an accurate filmography

of Capra's career, including all the early work he failed to acknowledge in what I came to realize was a most evasive autobiography. Although I found Capra's account of his triumphant rise in Hollywood beguiling, as most readers did, I was troubled by some aspects of his book, the parts that opened the door all too briefly on how angry, bitter, and violently prejudiced he also was. I wondered about that side of his personality, which was reflected in some of the darker elements of his films.

Despite all the belated hoopla surrounding Capra — a cinematic campaign train I had naively hopped aboard — even in the mid-seventies I could not help feeling a nagging resentment that the adjective “Capraesque” was being selectively applied only to the sunnier sides of his work. Capra's depiction of the corrupt side of American life that bedevils James Stewart's guileless Senator Jefferson Smith in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* before he gets wised up to the ways of our government to me was more characteristic and meaningful than the director's moments of forced optimism, although I could also respond to the buoyant, almost manic nature of his swings through the cycles of optimism and pessimism. That bipolar quality in his work (although I did not use that clinical word in my biography) appealed to me because I shared his view of life as a constantly fluctuating succession of emotional peaks and valleys.

Capra's films are so much more complex and conflicted than most of his youthful admirers understood in those days, and now his dark side tends to be recognized more readily. I remember being baffled in my youth by Capra's tendency to intermingle sentimental scenes with comments by wisecracking cynics, typified by the sour-faced Ned Sparks in *Lady for a Day* or gravel-voiced Lionel Stander in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. But I came to realize that those conflicting presentations are part of the films' way of showing the barriers faced by idealism in the real world, and I value the astringent parts that help to balance the sentimentality by making it palatable. As Capra once explained, “The *world* objects.” Capra fans tend to be idealists, usually liberal idealists, and in his canny quest for latterday rehabilitation and even sanctification, he misled his audience once again into thinking he was one of us. As a maverick and nonconformist by nature, I responded emotionally to the lone battles that Capra's heroes — Longfellow Deeds, Jefferson Smith, George Bailey — fought with the corrupt system that tried to crush them, and I took satisfaction from their ultimate triumph over the system, unlikely as it may be in many of the films.

Although I always had some doubts about what his films were saying, I tended not to dwell on some of their glaring contradictions, such as Capra's fear of the "common man" he ostensibly valorized but often depicted as an unreliable, roiling mass that could quickly turn into a mob. Capra's political viewpoint in his films seemed hopelessly incoherent, which did not bother me enough in my more sentimental youth. By 1975, however, after several years in the newspaper business and some battering experiences in the Hollywood trenches as an aspiring screenwriter, I was fast losing my old naivete, if not my idealism, which was already seeking other forms. My growing disillusionment with the movie industry and the American political system in that post-Watergate era was beginning to open my eyes, and I was ready to discover the truth about Capra. In particular, I was troubled by his postwar decline — one of the most precipitous collapses in the career of any major American director since D. W. Griffith (although it was rivaled by the collapse of Preston Sturges's career) — and wanted to know the reasons for it. The story I eventually uncovered was shocking and had long been hidden by Capra and others.

This most patriotic of American filmmakers, an immigrant who embraced the values of his adopted country, was smeared as disloyal because of the elements of social criticism in his best films, and in his panicky attempt to clear himself after World War II, Capra turned informer and blamed his screenwriters for the themes of his own work. By informing on his colleagues, he betrayed the Bill of Rights his films ostensibly celebrated. He violated the First Amendment protections of free speech and freedom of the press, which are among our most precious rights. Those of us who admire *Mr. Smith* so fervently had always valued Capra for championing those rights. But in violating them he betrayed his admirers' faith in him and destroyed himself. I am continually surprised that even after I made these revelations, some people still brush off Capra's informing as of small importance, rather than as the tragic flaw in the life of a man widely considered an American hero and a representative American figure.

My discoveries shed a fresh light on all the received wisdom about Capra and his work and compelled me to reconsider all he and it represented. The fact that the truth of Capra's life was so radically different from the myth had badly skewed perceptions of his work. Some critics and some of his admirers had already recognized that Capra's films were not the simple feel-good fantasies they appear to his less discerning fans.

Despite the emotionally winning qualities of his belatedly beloved 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, his last film of any real value, I had always resisted becoming a member of that film's quasi-religious cult. As a renegade Catholic who had finally broken free of the church's brainwashing in 1967, I was wary of how *Wonderful Life* solved intractable personal and social problems by resorting to the supernatural. I felt that the word "Capraesque" should also encompass the grim underside of his work, the disillusionment and despair on full view in such astringent films as *Mr. Smith*, *Meet John Doe*, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, and others. While I was touched by the exuberant warmth and humor, and the generous sense of community in Capra films, and by his great skill in bringing out the best qualities in his actors, I was also deeply affected by the despondency that afflicts so many of Capra's heroes and heroines, from Cooper and Stewart to Jean Arthur and Barbara Stanwyck. Although I imperfectly understood the full complexity of Capra's seemingly discordant artistic vision in those days, and had little sense of the true nature of the man behind it, I was a devoted champion of Capra, so much so that David Thomson, in his *Biographical Dictionary of the Film*, describes me as having been a "leading fan of the director." Thomson's comment referred in part to the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award tribute to Capra in 1982, which I wrote with producer George Stevens Jr. But I was far from blind to Capra's complexities even before I met him and began to learn his hidden truths.

As I ate lunch with Capra that day in the spring of 1975 in the luxurious dining room of the country club, with its wide windows overlooking the fairway of the golf course, the director held forth with his familiar "inspirational" homilies about the wondrous power of film to heal the afflicted and bring people together. He said he detected "a hunger for some kind of idealism" and a new thirst for comedy in young filmmakers he met on college campuses. He hoped for a return to romantic films because "any classic, whether it's in literature or film, contains some kind of transcendental sacrificial love. Everything that survives is love." These Pollyannish platitudes — incongruous enough in this wealthy setting — were jarringly mixed with a contrapuntal stream of jaundiced asides, in the customary vein of older directors in that era, about how contemporary Hollywood had succumbed to decadence. Capra was turned off to most modern films, with their "creep heroes — they don't fight for lost causes, they don't go all the way down the line for something." I observed "some bitterness evident" in Capra's blasting of his old studio, Columbia Pictures,

for letting him down on two late projects he was unable to film, but noted that Capra was now “content to be out of Hollywood” because, he said, “I know what it takes to make a film, I’m not kidding myself.” Directing a film “involves making 100 decisions a day without thinking,” he said. “That’s where age creeps in — I can’t make decisions as fast as I used to, and I can’t make them without worrying about them.”

With its trademark irreverence, *Variety* gave my interview the title “Capra Conks Creepy Pic Heroes.” Occasionally he gave out with a pithy remark of genuine wisdom, such as when I asked what advice he had for young filmmakers. “Don’t take advice,” he snapped. My editor at *Daily Variety* in Hollywood, Tom Pryor, an old friend of Capra’s, was baffled by that remark and wondered if that was worth quoting in another article I wrote, but I argued that it actually was great advice. Too many young filmmakers became all tangled up in trying to follow trends. Capra added, “Whatever the trend is, don’t follow it. That’s the surest way to go broke, the surest way to wind up hating yourself.” Capra also made an insightful observation about his approach to comedy and drama. He said that the special quality of a Capra hero — he mentioned Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*, Robert Williams in *Platinum Blonde*, and Gary Cooper in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* — is that he was “not so much chasing the woman as he was chasing ideas.”

I was still trying to piece together the different sides of Capra in my mind when a gray-haired, middle-aged man in a tie and blazer approached us with a folder of photographs. Capra was in the midst of one of his populist raps: “I’ve always had a hatred of rich people, since I was a kid. And you have a hell of a time selling comedies to bankers, because they don’t laugh much.” That was the kind of iconoclastic message that played so well with his youthful admirers.

“Frank, here are the pictures of you playing golf with President Ford,” the man said.

He spread the photos on the white tablecloth in front of Capra. The president, a fan of the elderly director, also had invited Frank and Lu to dinner at the White House. It was the only such honor Capra received in his lifetime; his encounters with Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom he told me he hated, were limited to kibitzing at a press conference in the Oval Office and running his wartime propaganda films for

FDR's approval. Capra naturally adored "Jerry" Ford for lionizing him, even if, he noted, when they played golf, the notoriously klutzy president's "ball goes all over the place," a trait Capra, with his training as a gag man, found endearing.

"Ah, wonderful," Capra sighed as he eagerly pored over the 8x11 glossy black-and-white photos of himself golfing with President Ford. One especially struck me: It showed Ford holding the pin and flag as Capra bent over to putt. I thought, That's an ultimate immigrant dream, to have the president of the United States serve as your caddie. Capra studied the pictures for a while, enraptured. The man promised he would send them to Capra the following week. Then he left our table. Capra turned back to me and asked,

"Where was I? Oh yeah, I was telling you that I've always had a hatred of bankers and rich people."

As I later told the *New York Times*, "Then he just continued, without losing a beat. That illuminated something for me about Capra: there was a contradiction between the image and the man."

In a flash, I realized that his populist image as the champion of the common man was merely a facade. When the facade was ripped away, I glimpsed a different man underneath. Someone calculating, insincere, secretive, pandering to his young liberal admirers while hiding his own political views and prejudices, whatever they actually were. In a word, this revered filmmaker was a phony.

I was stunned. And I realized I had discovered a great story, one that had been missed for decades by everyone in the media — an American icon who was seen as a representative of all that was best about the country but whose stature was largely based on a cleverly sustained fraud. What I had learned in Palm Springs planted the seeds of my biography of Frank Capra, although that lay years in the future, and as yet I only dimly comprehended the shape it might take or the kind of man he really was. I made a mental note:

"Find out more."