



Robert Leffingwell
Seab Cooley
Brigham Anderson
Bob Munson
Lafe Smith
Dolly Harrison
The President
Harley Hudson
Herbert Gelman
Johnny Leffingwell
Stanley Danta
Fred van Ackerman
Ellen Anderson
Hardiman Fletcher
Minority Leader
Orrin Knox

Henry Fonda
Charles Laughton
Don Murray
Walter Pidgeon
Peter Lawford
Gene Tierney
Franchot Tone
Lew Ayres
Burgess Meredith
Eddie Hodges
Paul Ford
George Grizzard
Inga Swenson
Paul McGrath
Will Geer
Edward Andrews

Advise and Consent finally reveals Preminger as one of the cinema's great moralists. The film's construction is founded upon an intricate pattern of parallels between various characters. Attitudes are defined and illuminated by their juxtaposition with other related yet significantly different attitudes. Each character is gradually led to the point where he must confront himself and pass judgment. Most of the major figures – Leffingwell, Anderson, Cooley, van Ackerman, the President – have images of themselves as 'men of principle', and by the end of the film each has had this image cracked or shattered. Only Munson, who has no such image, is exempt from this process (trial); and only Harley Hudson, the Vice-President, is led to a self-reappraisal which is more favourable than his previous image. These two emerge as the most sympathetic men in the film, the touchstones beside which the 'different sorts of failure' of the others fall into perspective.

A significant relation, and a careful distinction, is established between the attitudes of Cooley and Munson. Munson's reaction to Leffingwell's nomination is to protest to the President on the phone that Leffingwell is a man who has 'never played ball – not the most ordinary political courtesy kind of ball'. Yet with Munson this is a matter primarily of preserving the surface decencies that keep things running smoothly: he can acknowledge Leffingwell's sincerity and gifts. Cooley, on the other hand, has built up his feeling for propriety into a set of rigid principles whose artificiality and 'out-wornness' are copiously demonstrated. For him, Hardiman Fletcher's one-time 'Communist

affiliations' have made him a fallen man. Thus he can stoop to blackmail to gain his ends. As he tells Fletcher (and himself) that 'you'll have done a noble duty, sir – yes, sir, a noble duty', Cooley's marvellously judged over-emphasis reveals self-doubts which he has carefully suppressed. His southern gallantry does not prevent him from leering at secretaries. Munson's flexibility ('I guess I can stretch my responsibility a little') is shown as much in the ease of his charming relationship with his charming mistress as in his readiness to stand by the President's nominee. There is no cynicism or opportunism in his feeling that one must sometimes bend.

A simultaneous parallel and contrast is drawn between Cooley and Anderson on their first appearances. There is no pettiness in Anderson's 'pride': he won't let a personal grudge influence his attitude – Leffingwell was responsible for the rejection of his 'Power Bill'. Cooley, on the other hand, openly admits that he has not forgotten that (in Danta's words) Leffingwell 'made a liar out of' him. The attitudes of Cooley and Anderson are further related during the sub-committee hearing. When Leffingwell neatly turns the audience's laughter against Cooley's 'outworn principles', Anderson promptly shows anxiety lest 'pride' be sacrificed: '... we may reason away in the name of survival everything worth surviving for'. The film could stand as an inquiry into the validity of different sorts of pride. If Cooley's principles are artificial enough to allow him to stoop to any means to fulfil his 'noble duty', Anderson's 'pride' governs his every action and leads directly to his suicide. When Cooley in his final address declares 'I don't understand how principles of dignity can be outworn', it is natural to relate this *political* statement to the outworn (or at least misguided) 'principles of dignity' for which Anderson died.

We gain sufficient respect for Cooley on his first appearance as a man of principle ('That man' – Leffingwell – 'will lead us to perdition') to register as significant the way he passes van Ackerman with bowed head and a contemptuous, if Churchillian, wave of the hand. They represent the extremes – in politics, age, surface behaviour, self-possession – yet parallels are established between them. They are the two men whose images of themselves are at once the most clearcut and unrealistic. Van Ackerman *believes* himself to be sincere in his attitudes – in developing his 'peace organisation', and in all that he justifies by glibly remarking 'You can't hold down a senator's job just by kissing babies and

shaking hands'. This remark, addressed to Munson, connects up with Harley, who knows that the world sees him as 'chummy Harley, the housewives' pet'. Van Ackerman's only moment of self-doubt before his exposure comes when his habitual aggressive gestures with his pipe become so obtrusive that he can't help noticing.

Both he and Cooley, therefore, have a convenient mental block which allows them to use any means to encompass their ends; and at many points – Cooley's expression when confronted by the applause that greets Leffingwell's speech on 'outworn principles' – it is clear that personal pride motivates Cooley very much as a desire to be in the limelight motivates van Ackerman. The expression 'eating crow' is used of both, and they eat it publicly in the Senate-House. The moral distinction between them is made through their relative responsibility for Anderson's death – Cooley's very indirect – and through the ways in which they face their ultimate self-appraisal. Cooley is able to confront his realisation of responsibility with considerable grace in the exchange with Munson that follows his public apology, and in his subsequent 'Good luck' to Harley. The apology is shorn of vindictiveness and histrionics, his first honest and unexaggerated statement of his attitude to Leffingwell.

The feeling for senatorial decorum in Munson's attitude gets its endorsement from our reactions to van Ackerman's behaviour. Here the revealing parallel is between van Ackerman and Lafe Smith. In the exchange between Lafe and Cooley, Cooley denounces Lafe's accusation of an 'aged crust of prejudice' as an impertinence, and an example of the emotionalism Leffingwell arouses. This self-righteous indignation is unjustified because Lafe is merely retaliating, politely, to an insult from Cooley who is unscrupulously using his age as worthy of respect per se. Soon afterwards, however, at Dolly Harrison's party, van Ackerman is guilty of a genuine breach of courtesy, and Dolly (who was present in the Senate) draws the parallel for us: 'My, Mr. Leffingwell *does* cause excitement, doesn't he?'

The ultimate antithesis – it is emphasised again by juxtapositions – is that of van Ackerman and Harley Hudson, who emerge as respectively the most unsympathetic and the most admirable men in the film. At Dolly's party we move straight from van Ackerman's arrogant, compulsive outburst to Harley's 'humility' ('Fine word for the shakes – humility'). It is the neurotic van Ackerman, incapable of self-control or of seeing the effect of his words and actions on others, who provokes Harley's sudden, unwonted display of firmness and authority in the Senate. Harley's reaction links him with Munson who uses very similar words to van Ackerman at the end of the film, ('We tolerate just about everything here . . .'). Van Ackerman is directly responsible for Anderson's suicide, while Harley is the person who comes nearest to saving him, in the conversation on the plane. During this talk our estimate of Harley rises, and is expressed for us by Anderson (' . . . most underestimated man in Washington'). He *is* a man Anderson could confide in: he has the right understanding, sympathy, tolerance, breadth of outlook. His final decision to nominate his own secretary of state is taken on the spur of the moment, yet with calm deliberateness. Of all the characters he is the one most able to reach a mature, responsible decision without being *unduly* influenced by personal concerns or external pressures.

The motivations behind Harley's decision and behind Lafe's 'No' are different. Lafe is influenced primarily by his friendship for Anderson and his 'No' is a protest against Anderson's suicide and the pressures that drove him to it. It becomes clear in the scene on the ship that Harley, on the other hand, disapproves of the President's obstinacy, which

is the indirect cause of Anderson's suicide and the direct cause of the split within the party. Harley's refusal to use his affirmative vote represents his rejection of the personal pride which plays a decisive part in the President's obstinacy. Harley's last words imply the reassessment of himself which he has reached since the talk with Munson at Dolly's party. They follow the scene of van Ackerman's self-judgment, where he is forced to see himself and his actions for the first time as others see them. Significantly, it is the admirably open-minded and level-headed Munson who forces him to the point. Of all the characters Ackerman is the most trapped by his own illusions, and the most blind to the way he appears to the world, while Harley has the least illusions about the way the world sees him, as a 'compromise candidate'. When van Ackerman's image of himself is shattered, he suddenly feels himself an outcast, alone in the midst of others (an effect Preminger catches marvellously), just as his victim, Anderson, previously felt *himself*. But where van Ackerman's verdict on himself is endorsed by the film, Anderson's certainly is not. The parallel between Leffingwell and Anderson is more detailed. Each is forced to lie about a secret in his past, and it is the way the lies snowball that leads them to the actions implying their self-judgments. Their attitudes to lying are very different, and implicit in their opposed attitudes to pride which are revealed at the sub-committee hearing. Leffingwell's, much the more complicated, is presented to us lightly on his first appearance when he instructs his son to tell his telephone caller that he is not at home. 'Why do you want me to lie?' Johnny asks. His father replies with a smile, 'It's a Washington D.C. kind of lie'. All Leffingwell's lies are 'Washington D.C. kind of lies' – they are even condoned by the President. He lies, quite consciously, before the interview with Fletcher, without betraying any sign of strain beyond a tendency to rub his right wrist with his left thumb when confronted with the more taxing questions. He preserves his integrity by *knowing that he is lying*: unlike Anderson, he never lies to himself. He remains idealistic enough to go to the President afterwards and demand the withdrawal of his nomination, but realistic enough to allow the President to talk him out of it. His complex, flexible attitude is reflected throughout in his easy, man-to-man relationship with his son, which is based on honesty and mutual confidence.

This contrasts not only with the inner tensions of the Anderson household but with the relationship between Hardiman Fletcher and his children implied in the squabble over records. Here, in a matter of seconds, and entirely through his actors, Preminger shows us the essential effects of a life dominated by fear. Leffingwell can lie easily, but Fletcher's frightened dishonesty is much more insidious: his children tell us all we need to know about it. Because of his attitude to lying, Leffingwell can restore his son's confidence in him with ease. The film cuts from his 'I could tell you the truth' to the harassed face of Mrs. Anderson. We recall the President's words to Anderson earlier: 'We have to make the best of our mistakes – that's all Leffingwell's done'. The remark reflects as much on Anderson and his suicide as on Leffingwell.

Brigham Anderson's attitude to lying – and to Leffingwell's lies – is determined by the fact that he lies to himself: his letter to Ray was itself a lie. This interpretation is, I know, widely disputed, but it is the only one that fits the presented evidence: Anderson's homosexuality is not something left behind in the past but an ever-present threat made more dangerous by his refusal to confront it. We see this clearly if we study his behaviour during the trip to New York. His conscious reasons for going are not made explicit.

The blackmailers have told him that they have 'bought Ray' and that they have a letter and a photograph. We assume, therefore, that he goes to check up on this. At Manuel's flat he learns that Ray is at the Club, and leaves with Manuel's 'You can come back here with Ray – I mean, you've paid'. Both Manuel's flat and the homosexual club are presented in the same pattern: we are made to share Brig's first impression of sinister horror, and then we go on to modify our impression while seeing that Brig fails to modify his. The shot that introduces Manuel is the most 'melodramatic' in the film; once we are inside his flat Manuel is presented in as sympathetic a light as possible, allowing for his physical repulsiveness. The scene is made painful by Brig's inability to that Manuel *has* a sympathetic side.

In the club we see first the three overtly homosexual types in the hall who look Brig over as he passes them; once in, we see mostly ordinary-looking men sit chatting at tables and hear 'the voice of Frank Sinatra' from a juke-box. Neither here nor in Ray's behaviour is there anything to justify the *violence* of Brig's reactions, which suggest not so much disgust as a hysterical panic. The expression of spontaneous affection that lights up Ray's face when he sees Brig should be sufficient to correct any impression that Preminger approves of Brig's hurling his ex-friend away from him into the gutter. Indeed, taken in conjunction these two shots make the sense of the sequence clear: Brig is hysterically rejecting an aspect of himself with which he has always refused to come to terms. The semi-darkened, subterranean night-club, the sordid underworld in which society forces the homosexual to live, becomes a parallel for Brig's own inner suppressions. He rushes away without having done what he ostensibly came to do (he is already rushing before Ray has spoken). We cannot doubt that his suicide is the result of his trip to New York, though his situation remains, as far as the facts go, unaltered. He has learnt nothing new from Ray about the blackmailers. He has felt one side of his personality responding to what he has seen, and panicked. His immediate reaction on the plane to Harley's good-humoured 'Are you going to give in?' is very striking.

Only in the light of this interpretation do the earlier scenes in Brig's home make sense. When we are introduced to him, he interrupts an urgent telephone conversation with another senator to say goodbye to his little daughter, squatting before her and asking 'Do you still love me?'. There could hardly be a clearer way of establishing, in a single incident, his sense of the insecurity of his home-life. It is throughout the sense of *family* that involves him, more than any strong for his wife as an individual. The marriage works in so far as it relates to Brig's public life: we see Ellen sitting behind him throughout the sub-committee hearings, and witness the degree of her involvement in her husband's attitudes in the way in which she is shown biting her lip at the end of Leffingwell's attack on pride. But it is chiefly a lack of genuine intimacy that strikes us in their private scenes together. When Brig returns home at night later in the film he enters the child's room, tucks her in, strokes her head (at the risk of awakening her), then goes to his own bedroom and walks straight past his apparently sleeping wife to the bathroom. His reaction, when he discovers she is awake, is almost guilty. Finally, we have the long exchange between husband and wife that precipitates Brigham's dash to New York (when it begins, he is with his daughter, enclosing her head in his hands in a very possessive gesture). Here the shortcomings of the marriage become explicit. Ellen admits that 'We haven't had an exciting marriage', and seems eager to blame herself. Brig reassures her, but without acknowledging any blame on his side. The implication, if we

connect all the evidence, is that the relationship has suffered not so much from Brig's homosexual tendencies as from his self-deception. It is clear from her expressions before and after seeing the photograph and letter that Ellen would have reacted sympathetically to an equivalent of Leffingwell's 'I could tell you the truth'. And she is still trying to phone her husband when his suicide is discovered.

Anderson's development is a marvellous example of Preminger's method. Its basis is the stripping down of reality to essentials. In the actor's performance we are given the essence of the man in clear, bold strokes, with everything that is not strictly relevant to his progress towards the moment of self-judgment stripped away. There is no attempt to give us a full, naturalistic picture of the Andersons' home-life. We are shown only what we need in order to grasp the essentials of the relationship, and the carefully selected details take on a significance we could not attribute to them if they were submerged in an attempt at naturalistic surface-reproduction. We are kept aware, in the interests of clarity, of the acting *as* acting – the meaningful gesture or expression is given just sufficient emphasis for the significance to be taken. The burden falls squarely, then, on the actors: camera-movement, camera-angle, editing are all subordinated to the demand for the utmost clarity, precision and conciseness in the playing. It is this that makes the film peculiarly difficult for the critic to write about, for what is essential is a gesture, a movement, an intonation which words cannot convey. Useless to say that Anderson, stripped to the waist and regarding his body in the mirror, looks up at his own face at his wife's mention of Hawaii, looks hastily down, and develops a sudden very slight twitch in one cheek. Impossible to convey the force and subtlety of the actual effect.

Time and again a character is revealed in this precise, concrete way through a gesture or expression: van Ackerman's adoring, grateful smile as he rushes forward to applaud the President at the dinner, or the way he sits down on the 'train' as he says 'Is Brig co-operating?'; the stiff bow with which Anderson responds to the President's 'I said "hiya" Brigham'; Gelman's lop-sided walk and his inadvertent half-smile when the address he gave is revealed to be that of a fire-station; the way Munson is holding his spectacles at the end of Cooley's apology. Equally important are the tiny, unobtrusive elements of decor, such as the Renaissance Annunciation in Munson's office, the pretty, innocuous flower-picture above the Andersons' bed, the landscape photograph of Utah in Brig's office which is given such moving visual emphasis during the scene of the discovery of the suicide. Often the actors' intonations matter more than the words they speak: with Dolly's 'You are' (in response to Munson's remark that he is probably the only man in her life since her husband's death), Munson's 'Are you sleepy?' (end of same scene), the President's '... personal vendetta', or the way Fletcher's daughter says 'Daddy', a single phrase or word can sum up a whole outlook through a vocal inflection. This is impossible to convey on paper: the spectator either experiences it or he doesn't. I can only state my conviction that *Advise and Consent*, both in its astonishingly complex and lucid total organisation and in the concrete realisation of its smallest details, reveals the mind of a master.

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Movie, 4, 1962. ©Estate of Robin Wood

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