“Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” [1939, nominated for best picture Oscar the same year as “Gone with the Wind” and “The Wizard of Oz”], directed by Frank Capra who also directed James Stewart after they both returned from World War II in “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Consider the strengths and weaknesses of the film in addressing themes and concerns of a class in American government. Another area to consider is the following: If the film was good in addressing political themes in 1939, is it still timely/relevant in the context of 2010? If so, how? If not, why not?

It should be recalled that, in 1939, Franklin Roosevelt was still in the White House and very popular even though the country was still in the grips of the Great Depression. The Republican Party was very weak but the Democratic Party in the Congress was controlled by southerners, many of whom were hostile to the New Deal. Many cities and states had political machines of the kind referred to in the film. The evolution and decline of political machines should also be considered.

When he was cast in this film, Stewart was known as a good actor but was not a superstar. He became one with this film and the release the next year of “The Philadelphia Story” for which he won an Oscar. Claude Rains who plays the older senator was an accomplished actor who is best known for playing the corrupt French policeman in “Casablanca,” where he had a number of classic lines that have become shorthand for observers of the social scene. Jean Arthur [Saunders] is a wonderfully expressive actress.