

SUGGESTED FILMS

The following films have been selected from *The 25 Greatest Legal Films* and *Honorable Mentions* compiled by The American Bar Association in 2008. To view the entire list of films, go to www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/the_25_greatest_legal_movies. We gratefully acknowledge the ABA's permission to include these films and their accompanying synopses as an additional resource for the VBA Rule of Law Project. We hope you will find these films an instructive addition to your classes. As with longer works of literature, we recommend that, to make the most of instructional time, teachers may want to consider using selected scenes from these movies rather than show the entire film. Lesson plans for many of these films are available on various Internet websites.

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962):

Gregory Peck lends his legendary dignity to the role of Atticus Finch, Harper Lee's iconic small-town attorney. Penned for the screen by Horton Foote, the movie was an instant classic, as lawyer Finch rises above the naked racism of Depression-era Alabama to defend a crippled black man (Brock Peters) falsely accused of rape by a lonely, young white woman. Finch's quiet courage is seen through the eyes of Scout (Mary Badham), his 6-year-old daughter, and embraced by an emerging generation of lawyers as the epitome of both moral certainty and unyielding trust in the rule of law. When the accuser's drunken, incredulous father glares and asks Atticus, "What kind of man are you?" the unspoken answer is easy: both the self-assured lawyer and upright human being we all hope to be.

Twelve Angry Men (1957):

Henry Fonda produced and starred in this faithful adaptation of Reginald Rose's critically acclaimed stage play chronicling the hostile deliberations of a jury in a death penalty case. A lone juror (Fonda) expresses his doubts about what seems at first an open-and-shut prosecution. What tumbles out of the ensuing discussion is a gut-wrenching examination of the prejudices, prejudgments and personal psychological baggage these assembled citizens have brought to a life-or-death debate over the fate of the young Puerto Rican defendant. Based on Rose's own experience as a juror in a manslaughter trial, the play was first adapted for TV by Sidney Lumet, who went on to direct the movie version, his first feature film.

Inherit the Wind (1960):

...Spencer Tracy and Frederic March, play two grand old lions of the law, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, as they grapple in the historic 1925 Scopes "monkey trial" in backwoods Dayton, Tenn. The film, adapted from a 1955 play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, is a fictionalized account, and the characters' names are changed, however slightly (Tracy's Darrow is Henry Drummond, and March's Bryan is Matthew Harrison Brady). But much of the courtroom testimony was taken straight from the trial transcript. Nor have Americans evolved much; 80 years later a federal judge in Pennsylvania was forced to rule on "intelligent design."

A Man for All Seasons (1966):

Paul Scofield [provides an] Oscar-winning performance as Sir Thomas More, the Tudor-era judge made chancellor of England. He is caught in the political struggle involving Henry VIII's decision to defy the Roman Catholic Church and divorce his wife to wed Anne Boleyn. Lines from playwright Robert Bolt's stirring script are frequently quoted in U.S. court opinions: "I know what's legal, not what's right. And I'll stick to what's legal." And: "This country is planted thick with laws, from coast to coast—man's laws, not God's! And if you cut them down, and you're just the man to do it, do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?"

Philadelphia (1993) (Teacher discretion advised.):

Tom Hanks won an Oscar as an Ivy-educated gay attorney who claims his big-time law firm fired him after discovering he contracted AIDS. Denzel Washington [provides a] vibrant and nuanced performance as the solo personal injury lawyer who takes the case when everyone else turns [it] ...down, and who comes to terms with his own homophobia.

Judgment at Nuremberg (1961):

Stanley Kramer directed this searing portrayal of the Nazi war crimes trials set in 1948. The ... script focuses, in particular, on charges brought against four German judges who are accused of allowing their courts to become accomplices to Nazi atrocities. An American judge, Dan Haywood (Spencer Tracy), finds himself trying to understand how these once-esteemed colleagues allowed themselves to be used. He gets little or no help from average Germans, who are busy distancing themselves from Germany's Nazi past. When one of the judges, Ernst Janning (Burt Lancaster), breaks from the others and confesses, it becomes clear that—whatever their original intentions—these judges have chosen political obligations over their personal senses of right and wrong.

Young Mr. Lincoln (1939):

Henry Fonda makes an engaging, beardless and believable Abraham Lincoln in John Ford's fictionalized account of Lincoln's early adult years from New Salem to Springfield.... The key plot point revolves around a killing that takes place during a July 4 brawl. As a newly minted lawyer, the young Lincoln manages to quell a lynch mob by telling them he needs the two brothers accused in the murder to be his first real clients. The film won an Academy Award for its screenplay and has been named to the National Film Registry.

Amistad (1997):

Steven Spielberg directed this historic drama of the famous 1839 slave ship uprising. An all-star cast includes Matthew McConaughey, Morgan Freeman and Anthony Hopkins as former President John Quincy Adams, who argues the case to the U.S. Supreme Court. Justice Harry Blackmun reads the court's opinion in a cameo role as Justice Joseph Story. The film was criticized for taking liberties with the facts, but it succeeds as a portrayal of

antebellum America coming to grips with slavery—and how the law was employed both for and against.

Ghosts of Mississippi (1996): Based on the true story of efforts to bring to justice Byron De La Beckwith for the 30-year-old murder of civil rights activist Medgar Evers, the film begins with the murder and the events surrounding the first two trials, both ending in hung juries. The movie then focuses on the joint efforts of District Attorney Bobby DeLaughter and Myrlie Evers, wife of the slain civil rights activist, as they struggle to bring Beckwith to trial for the third time and succeed in seeing him convicted for his 30-year old crime. (Review adapted from the ABA synopsis and a review by [Joel Schesser <joelsd@aol.com>](mailto:joelsd@aol.com).)

The Pelican Brief (1993): This adaptation of John Grisham’s novel, recounts the attempt to solve the assassination of two Supreme Court justices. Darby Shaw, a law student, and Gray Grantham, a Washington investigative reporter, begin a search for the truth that leads them to the White House and suggestions that the president’s staff may be involved, or at least attempting to cover up the murders. Stonewalled by the FBI and forced into running for their lives, they finally discover that the murders are part of a corporate conspiracy to gain drilling rights in an environmentally protected area. The story reflects the ever-growing concern regarding large corporations and their ties to elected officials, and the impact this has on the government’s obligation to act according to the rule of law in protecting citizens’ rights.

***The Oxbow Incident** (1943):** This adaptation of Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s novel, stays close to his original story. Set in 1885 Nevada, the film captures the horror a western lynching party as seen through the eyes of Gil Carter and Art Craft as they get caught up in the mob mentality that results in the capture and lynching of three wranglers falsely accused of stealing cattle. Against all their protests and a few objections from some members of the posse, notably Gil and Art who want to wait for more evidence and a proper trial, stronger, more violent voices prevail; and, in the end, the three men are hanged. Too late, the posse discovers that the men were innocent. Clark’s novel goes far beyond the typical western tale of good vs. evil. In this situation good and evil are ambiguous concepts and the very nature of justice as attainable is questioned.

***Seven Days in May**:** Adapted by Rod Serling from the best-selling novel by Fletcher Knebel and Charles Waldo Bailey II, *Seven Days in May* was allegedly inspired by the far-right ramblings of one General Edwin Walker. At the height of the Cold War, American President Jordan Lyman, more concerned with conscience than popularity, negotiates a controversial treaty with the Soviet Union. As the beleaguered president’s approval rating plummets, General James Mattoon Scott, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and other senior officers, convinced that the president’s actions threaten national security, plan a *coup d’etat* to seize the government. Colonel “Jiggs” Casey and alcoholic Senator Raymond Clark finally reveal the plot, thus forcing the resignations of Scott and his fellow collaborators. *Seven Days in May* serves as a cautionary tale for all citizens who assume that the rule of law will never allow such events to happen in America

* Indicates our selections. Please, contact us with your recommendations. For contact information, click on the “Contact Us” link in the navigation bar.

