

# MOVIE REVIEW: *GOOD NIGHT AND GOOD LUCK*

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*Good Night and Good Luck* portrays the journalist Edward R. Murrow's passionate response to the unfolding of disturbing national events, and the difficult decision an administrator has to make as he weighs the preservation of his company and the tenure of an admired but politically controversial employee.

The movie, in black and white, takes place in the United States of the early 1950s, when the Junior Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph R. McCarthy, feverishly hunts those whom he suspects might have any association with the Communist Party. McCarthy conducts investigative Senate hearings, acting more like a one-man committee rather than as the Chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Any criticism of McCarthy's incriminatory tactics subjects the critic to scrutiny, interrogation, and harassment.

*Good Night and Good Luck* opens with a retrospective speech by Ed Murrow (David Strathairn) at a dinner in his honor given by the Radio and Television News Directors Association in 1958. In his speech, Murrow reflects upon his years with CBS five years earlier when he used his weekly program, "See It Now," to challenge the McCarthy witch-hunting hearings. At that time, Murrow said, television was used "to detract, delude, amuse and insulate us. It was fat, comfortable, and complacent." In the course of around ninety minutes, the viewer is presented with back and forth scenes that alternate between

CBS's news studio and offices, the neighborhood jazz bar where the news staff congregates, the private lives of studio employees, and archival McCarthy footage.

Fred Friendly (George Clooney), the producer of Murrow's "See It Now" Program, shares Murrow's passionate opposition to the toxic McCarthy hearings. The objective of their collaborative work is to awaken the public's conscience to the McCarthy-inspired growing paranoia of communist infiltration; the destructive effects of character assassinations; the impact of arbitrary, unilaterally made decisions on the lives of accused citizens; and the inherent dangers of a political system that lacks due judicial process. "See It Now"—which Murrow always ends with the phrase: "Good night, and good luck"—becomes the forum through which Murrow blends news reporting with powerful commentaries. In Murrow's actual broadcast scripts, delivered by Strathairn in persuasive fashion, the viewer is captivated by the eloquent and elegant use of the English language. He informs the public of the week's events on the Senate floor and appraises the effects of McCarthy's feigned accusations of individuals' political ideologies and supposed involvement with communist, subversive and un-American activities.

The chairman of CBS, William S. Paley (Frank Langella), initially supports Friendly and Murrow's work but remains skeptical about possible adverse effects of Murrow's commentaries on CBS. In private discussions,

he shares his skepticism with the supportive Friendly and the obstinate Murrow. Paley's skepticism graduates to real concern in the face of pressure from government representatives and program sponsors. Beset by threatening external pressures and unyielding staff, Paley finds himself the principal player in a contest between the survival of CBS and that of an esteemed broadcaster. The survival of CBS depends on his administrative decision that would appease the program's critics and sponsors. Murrow's broadcasting career depends on his willingness to comply and compromise his convictions. Paley's ultimate decision to discontinue "See It Now" is a powerful sign of how television news had already become a money-making enterprise subject to external pressures.

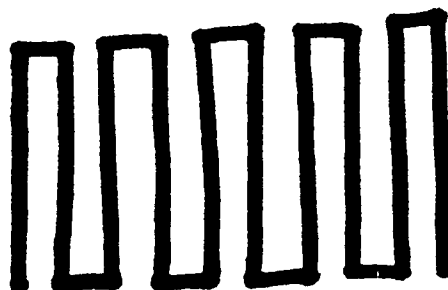
The movie concludes with a return to Murrow's speech at the dinner party in his honor. Strathairn passionately and convincingly delivers Murrow's own words about journalism, integrity and the obligations of journalists.

In *Good Night and Good Luck*, director and co-writer George Clooney, co-writer Grant Heslov, and cinematographer Robert Elswit present the viewer with an intense historical account of one of the country's most shameful periods, and, in subtle fashion, make connections between past and present political processes, authoritarian tactics used to influence public opinion, diluted news reporting to appease powerful sponsors and resolution of administrative dilemmas that protect the organization.

The historical importance of the events portrayed in *Good Night and Good Luck* is unquestionable. Any reservations about Murrow's ability to view the events of the time objectively dissipate with the powerful effects of the archival footage. The viewer is dumbfounded by McCarthy's image on the screen, his presentation of a politically perverted ideology during a televised rebuttal and his ability to paralyze the rational thinking of so many of his fellow Senators and of most of the nation. The acting is skilled, dynamic, and captivating. Strathairn's stellar performance is electrifying and deserves the Oscar nomination he received. Paley, a giant figure at CBS, is the compassionate, tolerant and yet shrewd administrator. In an era when executive decisions are less litigious he takes decisive actions unilaterally and he performs his role superbly.

*Good Night and Good Luck* is a must-see movie, not only because of the impressive technical and artistic talent that it presents, but also because of its historical significance, its relevance to current events, and its thought-provoking and soul-searching content. Do not miss it.

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