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## CHAPTER 1

# *Gabriel Over the White House*

1933 | DIRECTED BY GREGORY LA CAVA

### TEACHER OVERVIEW

Louis B. Mayer hated it. “Put that picture in its can,” said the head of MGM Studios. “Take it back and lock it up!”

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt quite liked it, reportedly watching it in the White House three times. “It would do a lot of good,” he said.

The movie alarmed the censors. As one wrote to producer Irving G. Thalberg, “I wonder if it would not be advisable for you to sound a note of warning to some of the responsible heads of the industry about making a type of picture portraying large groups of distressed, dissatisfied or unemployed people going en masse in an anti-government attitude of mind to the national capital to make their protest felt?”

Some movie critics as well were alarmed because of the film’s focus on a totalitarian take-over of America. Writing in *The Nation*, William Troy stated the film could “convert innocent American movie audiences to a policy of Fascist dictatorship in this country.”

Newspaper magnate William Hearst backed the movie, financially as well as politically, writing specific lines of dialogue for the fictional American president to deliver both to Congress and to the world during an international peace summit. No wonder then that Hearst-owned newspapers described the movie as “tremendous . . . perhaps the most tremendous the world has ever known.”

“What seems most remarkable (and worthy of historical mention) today about *Gabriel over the White House* is the naturalness with which an aggressively dictatorial president assumes almost absolute control over the nation. To accept this premise—and the rest of the film—uncritically requires a considerable exercise of imagination, but the political segments are often credible, especially when considered against the background of the early 1930s.” —ROBERT L. MCCONNELL, *CINEMA JOURNAL*

“The good news: he reduces unemployment, lifts the country out of the Depression, battles gangsters and Congress, and brings about world peace. The bad news: he’s Mussolini. *Gabriel Over the White House* is a delight precisely because of its confused ideology.” —MIKE MASHON, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Judson Hammond is the fictional president of a party—never named—that expects their “boy” to do what the political machines want him to do. A near-death experience changes Hammond. He wakes from a coma determined to do the greatest good for the greatest number, even if it means firing the cronies in his cabinet, dismissing Congress, declaring a national emergency and martial law. For movie audiences both weary and fearful after years of the Great Depression and rampant gang warfare, a movie about a political leader who leads—even if it means losing some freedoms—struck a chord. For some, that chord was notes of hope; for others, a serious warning about the precarious fate of democracy.

The essential questions the movie poses are these: Can an autocrat ensure the common good of the people? Why would a nation yearn for a benevolent dictatorship and agree to a loss of civil rights? *Gabriel Over the White House* challenges students to think about the power of the presidency and the Constitutional limitations of the office. By tapping their knowledge of the division of power among the three

branches of government and the use of “executive privilege” and “martial law,” students not only will comprehend the movie’s message to audiences of the 1930s, but can also explore the film’s relevancy for today’s political debates.

## SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

The plot of *Gabriel Over the White House* centers on three critical social issues the country faced in 1932: The Great Depression and resulting unemployment of American citizens, many of whom lost their homes as well as their income; the violence of organized crime and racketeering in the country; and the reparation of international war debts. The lessons approach the film with these three scenarios in mind. Lesson 1 establishes the overall historical context for the film by reviewing the economic crisis that threatened American democracy in the 1930s and which resulted in the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The activity includes an archival newsreel covering the inauguration of FDR. Lessons 2 and 3 focus on the fictional president, Judson Hammond, and the near-death experience that changes his political ideology.

**Teacher’s Note:** Selected scenes for this chapter are on the Module 5 supplemental clip reel.

LESSONS	ACTIVITIES	MATERIALS
1. A Benevolent Autocracy	A. The Roosevelt Dictatorship B. FDR and The Forgotten Men	<b>PPT slides 1 – 10</b> Film Reader Selections: • “The Defining Moment” • “FDR’s ‘Forgotten Man’ Speech” Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel
2. A Divine Madness	C. The Machine Politician D. The President Awakens	<b>PPT slides 11 – 19</b> Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel
3. The Power of the Presidency	E. Martial Law F. “Those Debts Have Got to Be Paid”	<b>PPT slides 20 – 26</b> Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel

## LESSON 1

### A Benevolent Autocracy

*The situation is critical, Franklin. You may have no alternative but to assume dictatorial powers.*

—JOURNALIST WALTER LIPPMANN, IN A PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT-ELECT ROOSEVELT IN WARM SPRINGS, GEORGIA, FEBRUARY 1, 1933

### ACTIVITY A: THE ROOSEVELT DICTATORSHIP

## ENGAGE

**Ask students to explain what is meant by the phrase “benevolent dictator.”** Benevolence means kindness or goodwill towards others. A benevolent person is one who treats others with compassion. A dictator is an autocrat who controls the actions of others and demands their loyalty. The phrase *benevolent dictator* is seemingly an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

**ASK:** Can a dictator be compassionate and rule in his or her people’s best interests?

Prompt further discussion by asking students why some people may wish for a benevolent dictator. The longing is not necessarily to be controlled by another person whose intentions are for the goodwill of

all. Rather the longing is often for a leader who can achieve specific goals by eliminating opposition. In a democracy, all people have a voice. In a dictatorship, however, one person speaks and/or thinks for all. Accept all reasonable responses.

Conclude the Engage activity by defining fascism. Fascism is a political ideology that developed in the early 20th century following the end of World War I. It is an authoritarian system of government that enforces nationalist ideals and objectives, often using propaganda techniques and violent military tactics. In Italy, Benito Mussolini rose to power as a fascist dictator in the 1920s. In Germany, Adolf Hitler likewise rose to power. The goal of their fascist regimes was to make their nations stronger by any means possible. According to scholar Robert Paxton of Columbia University, these means included the suppression of individual liberties, imprisoning opponents, and the use of unlimited police power.

## EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE

### **Briefly review, if necessary, the historical period in America known as the Great Depression.**

On the morning of October 29, 1929—a day that would become known as Black Tuesday—stock market values had begun to drop significantly. By afternoon, the market had crashed. Banks and businesses, as well as individual investors, were losing money by the thousands. The downward spiral had begun days earlier. But on Black Tuesday, the bottom simply fell out of the market. Many who had been wealthy a week or two earlier now found themselves penniless.

PPT

### **Establish the historical period in which this film was made by displaying and discussing PPT slides 2 - 4.**

- **PPT slide 2: “This Way Out!”** This political cartoon appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in December 1929. Explain the symbolism of the old man in the barrel who represents the outgoing year (1929) and the child-like man in the top hat who represents the beginning of the new year (1930). Each detail in the composition of this editorial cartoon suggests meaning. The “vacancy” sign, for example, indicates the old year has ended and a new year is moving in. The naked 1929 wearing nothing but a barrel represents the stock market crash that left so many Americans flat broke. Review the basics of the crash and the ripple effects across the country.
- **PPT slide 3: “A Wise Economist Asks a Question.”** Even individuals who had not invested in stocks felt the effects of the crash as it reverberated across the nation. Businesses laid off workers. Families who had bought cars or homes on an installment plan could not make their payments. For those who had managed to save money in the local banks, retrieving that money became a challenge as the banks locked their doors.
- **PPT slide 4: “Christmas Eve Preparation.”** This political cartoon most likely appeared in the *Washington Star* newspaper. “Herb” is out-going president Herbert Hoover. He is wrapping as gifts the social problems of the country at the time of the election: balancing the budget, financial relief for farmers hit very hard during the Great Depression, the “forgotten man” (referencing all the poor and downtrodden victims of the Great Depression), and Prohibition which was the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. Indicate that Prohibition was linked to an increase in organized crime and gangsterism. Note that in 1933, Inauguration Day was on March 4.



**Screen and discuss “Newsreel of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1933 Inauguration”** (on the Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel). This newsreel begins with images of an airplane rushing film of the event from Washington D.C. to New York City, followed by the president’s oath of office, excerpts from his inaugural speech and finally, images of the inaugural parade.

**ASK:** What does this short news story reveal about news reporting in 1933? *Encourage comments on the mediums available at this time—newsreels that played in movie theaters, radio broadcasts, and newspapers. Ensure students understand that the internet and social media did not exist, and television broadcasting was quite limited. The airplane that delivers the film of the inauguration to New York City was an innovation in delivering the news quickly.*

**Share the following excerpts from FDR's inaugural address.** The president's speech ran approximately 20 minutes. The newsreel provides only a short clip of that speech, and it includes a controversial line about executive powers. The passage below contains this and other excerpts from his address.

*It is to be hoped that the normal balance of executive and legislative authority may be wholly adequate to meet the unprecedented task before us. But it may be that an unprecedented demand and need for undelayed action may call for temporary departure from that normal balance of public procedure.*

*I am prepared under my constitutional duty to recommend the measures that a stricken nation in the midst of a stricken world may require. These measures, or such other measures as the Congress may build out of its experience and wisdom, I shall seek, within my constitutional authority, to bring to speedy adoption.*

*But in the event that the Congress shall fail to take one of these two courses, and in the event that the national emergency is still critical, I shall not evade the clear course of duty that will then confront me. I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.*

**ASK:** What is the president proposing to do if Congress fails to act on his policies for economic recovery? Why does he feel this action would be justified? He did act upon some of the things he promised, i.e., closing the banks.

**PPT**

**Display PPT slides 5 and 6: Letters of Support for FDR's Use of Broad Executive Power.** The president received “hundreds of thousands” of letters from American citizens following his inauguration. A great many of these letters expressed their faith in his leadership, and if necessary, support for his statement about superseding Congress in order to implement his political programs and end the economic crisis. Two letters are provided here, one from the Wisconsin Radiator Furniture Company and the other from the Association Better Citizenship, Inc.

**Conclude the activity by sharing the information below, taken from the FDR Library.**

FDR's inauguration took place at the lowest point of the Great Depression. With unemployment soaring and banks collapsing, public fear was so great that many were ready to support sweeping emergency powers for the new President. Dictatorship was on the rise overseas. Indeed, March 1933 was the moment when fascist leader Adolf Hitler consolidated power in Germany. And while Hitler was viewed with concern by many Americans, some expressed admiration for the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

As the inauguration approached, influential voices called for granting Roosevelt unprecedented authority to ignore Congress and even the Constitution. Nationally-syndicated newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann told his readers, “A mild species of dictatorship will help us over the roughest spots in the road ahead.” The liberal Catholic magazine *Commonweal* asserted FDR should have “the powers of a virtual dictatorship to reorganize the government.” Alfred E. Smith, the Democratic Party's 1928 presidential candidate, reflected (with some exaggeration) that during World War I “we wrapped the Constitution in a piece of paper, put it on the shelf and left it there until the war was over.” The Depression, he felt, was a similar “state of war.”

On Inauguration Day, the *New York Herald-Tribune* ran an approving headline: “For Dictatorship If Necessary.” Other newspapers sounded similar notes in their coverage. The immense crowd at the inauguration gave its greatest applause when FDR said he was ready to assume extraordinary powers if Congress failed to act against the emergency. Eleanor Roosevelt found the reaction “a little terrifying,” realizing the public would do whatever FDR wished.

Though talk of dictatorship was in the air, FDR chose the path of persuasion and democratic action, not coercion.

## ENRICHMENT



**Assign for independent reading “The Defining Moment”** (Portraits of America Film Reader). Author Jonathan Alter discusses the Roosevelt dictatorship that could have happened but did not.

## ACTIVITY B: FDR AND THE FORGOTTEN MEN

### ENGAGE



**Display and discuss PPT slides 7 and 8.** Use the photographs to introduce students to the concept of “the forgotten man” and the bonus army protest.

- **PPT slide 7: Bonus Army Demonstration, 1932**

During the summer of 1932, this “army” of war veterans and their families marched to the nation’s capital, hoping to persuade Congress to award their promised bonus pay earlier than the scheduled 1945 date. As many as sixty thousand men congregated. They set up shacks on the banks of the Anacosta River and in empty lots. Many occupied abandoned buildings within sight of the Capitol building. President Hoover secretly ordered the government to provide tents, cots, army rations, and medical care. The large number of homeless and disheveled men, camped in the capital and milling around the streets, distressed many merchants. In the heat of summer, the sanitary conditions in the camps became pestilent. A reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* described the men as “ragged, weary, and apathetic,” with “no hope on their faces.”

- **PPT slide 8: Conflict and Flames, 1932**

In July, Congress voted 62 to 18 to reject the early release of bonus pay. Defeated, most veterans returned home, provided with free rail passage. But ten thousand remained. On the morning of July 28, a group of forty men attempted to occupy an evacuated building. Police responded and two protesters were killed. President Hoover ordered federal troops to occupy the area and maintain peace. The military force used tanks to enter and destroy the camps. The protesters were unarmed and included women and children as well as the war veterans. Using tear gas and tanks, the troops pushed the protesters across the river. Wounded people filled local hospitals. The use of the military resulted in harsh criticism from the media. The *Washington Daily News* described the scene as “pitiful,” and commented, “If the Army must be called out to make war on unarmed citizens, this is no longer America.”

### EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE



**Read and discuss “FDR’s ‘Forgotten Man’ Speech”** (Portraits of America Film Reader). Recommended discussion questions are below.

### GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. What was the great national emergency the country faced fifteen years before and how did the government respond then?  
*The Great War (later to be known as World War I). Through mobilization of the entire country, the United States was able to send troops to defeat the enemy.*
2. In your opinion, for what purpose did Roosevelt link that event to the present-day (1932) economic crisis?  
*By reminding the nation of a previous successful mobilization of the country to secure victory worldwide, Roosevelt argues that the same type of strong leadership and a similar mobilization effort can end the social and economic hardships the country now faces.*

3. Explain the phrase “infantry of our economic army.”  
*Roosevelt again uses the language of war (infantry) to identify the common man and woman whose well-being is necessary for the country as a whole to recover from economic depression.*
4. Roosevelt states that the fate of homeowners and city dwellers is linked to the fate of the farmers of America. What reasoning does he provide to support this?  
*He argues that farmers cannot earn a living if the prices they get for their crops is less than what it costs to grow them. He provides statistics indicating one half of America’s citizens live on farms or in small towns and suggests if one half of the country is bankrupt, then the entire country will fail. (Note: Teachers may wish to cross-reference the introductory lesson and PPT slide presentation for a discussion of the Grange Movement and the significance of the American farmer for the nation’s welfare).*
5. What does Roosevelt propose in order to keep the railroads and factories operational?  
*Restore buying power to the working class. Specifically, he wants the government to provide as much funding to the people at the bottom of the economic pyramid as they are spending on the banks and corporations at the top of the pyramid.*
6. Who is the forgotten man, according to Roosevelt?  
*The men and women who are at the bottom of the economic pyramid, the working class rather than the middle or upper classes.*
7. What criticism does Roosevelt levy at the existing federal administration in its response to this national emergency?  
*The current political leaders do not understand the importance of the working class and are unable to plan ahead. He suggests they waited for the system to break before taking any action.*

**Introduce the screening activity.** Although the Depression wrought havoc on many Americans, movies seemed to be an affordable escape from drudgery and fear. Crime dramas, screwball comedies, and musicals played to large audiences across the country. The clip students will watch is from one of the most popular musical films of the period, *The Gold Diggers of 1933*. The show was a comedy but the grand finale was anything but funny. It was a somber statement on an existing and troubling social ill—the fate of war veterans.



**Screen *Gold Diggers of 1933*: “Remember My Forgotten Man”** (on the Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel).



Discussion questions are on **PPT slides 9 and 10**.

### **GUIDED DISCUSSION**

1. How do the women seen through the windows of the building differ from the woman in the street by the lamppost? How do they differ from each other?  
*Placing them inside a building rather than in the street suggests they are keepers of the home—the wives, mothers, grandmothers of the men. The woman in the street is dressed more provocatively suggesting her relationship with the forgotten man is romantic. She is the lover, not the wife or mother.*
2. The number includes a close-up shot of a war medal worn inside the forgotten man’s jacket. The song lyrics do not mention a medal. Why do you think the filmmaker decided to add this element to the scene?  
*The medal identifies the man as a war veteran. Answers will vary as to why the director thought this was a necessary shot, but certainly the use of a close-up always signals something important the director wants the audience to see. In the context of the film, the shot shows us what the police officer sees, and so we understand why he changes his behavior toward the man.*

3. How does the choreography express the optimism and then pessimism of war?  
*The constant movement of men, both to war and from war, suggests the large number of veterans. Those going to war are celebrated by the crowd on the sidelines. Those returning stagger or help wounded comrades. No one is cheering on the sidelines now.*
4. What is the significance of showing the men in the breadline?  
*The image reinforces the lament, “Look at him today,” that yesterday’s hero is now forced to rely on charity in order to survive.*
5. As the musical number ends, men and women together sing and hold up outstretched arms. Explain the meaning and the overall effect of this climactic moment in the musical number.  
*Men and women need one another. This image communicates a society appealing for the common good. Helping the forgotten man means helping everyone in the country. The effect on a large movie screen must have been quite powerful for the audience, most of whom would have either been veterans or women who sent sons and husbands off to war.*

**Think more about it.** Is this musical number critical of the presidency and Congress? Explain why you do or do not think so.

**Conclude the activity.** Ask students to discuss how this lesson’s primary source documents (editorial cartoons, newsreel, photographs, and movie scene) help them to understand the concerns of Americans in the early 1930s. Encourage students to make a list of questions triggered by these documents.

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## LESSON 2

### A Divine Madness

*Reviewers at the time called Gabriel the first important political film of the sound era and hailed it as the first Hollywood production to acknowledge the Depression openly... film historians... generally agreed that it was a defining motion picture that expressed a tendency shared by many during the economic turmoil of the 1930s to gravitate toward totalitarian solutions to society’s problems.*

—LOUIS PIZZITOLA, *HEARST OVER HOLLYWOOD: POWER, PASSION, AND PROPAGANDA IN THE MOVIES*

### ACTIVITY C: THE MACHINE POLITICIAN

#### ENGAGE

**Discuss the meaning of a machine politician.** A political “machine” is an organization in which a single powerful individual or a small group of people wield authority or influence over a larger group of followers. A *machine politician* is someone whose political beliefs and actions are dictated by or in keeping with the organization’s goals. Generally, the political machine’s own interest is a priority rather than the interests of others who are not supporters. In exchange for support, the machine would grant special favors such as appointment to public offices or protection from police. Overall, the phrases *political machine* and *machine politician* have negative connotations associated with corruption.

#### EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE

**Define political satire.** Satire is a type of humor that uses irony, exaggeration and/or ridicule to criticize a current social, political, or economic situation. A *political satire* takes specific aim at elected officials and government policies. The goal of the satire may be to increase public awareness of the situation or to persuade the public into activism. The humor is expressed not only through lines of dialogue, but also the situation in which the characters find themselves and how they react to those situations.

Encourage students to comment on more contemporary satires that they may have read or watched, such as Saturday Night Live sketches that have political allusions.



**Screen *Gabriel Over the White House*, “Taking the Oath of Office”** (on the Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel).



Discussion questions appear on **PPT slides 11 – 13**.

### **GUIDED DISCUSSION**

1. In your opinion, why did the director decide to begin the movie with the president-elect taking the oath of office?  
*The presidential oath of office is more than mere ceremony. It is a statement that the elected official will defend the Constitution. All presidents take the oath. Not all keep that oath or interpret the oath in the same way. That is the subject of this film.*
2. The scenes following the inaugural parade include a number of comments about how Hammond got elected. The statements are made in casual conversation, followed by laughter. But they are examples of political satire. Explain the political subtext of each statement below.
  - a) Hammond says good night to the vice president, adding “I hope you sleep well.” He replies, “When did a vice president ever do anything else?” *This suggests that the office of vice president is ceremonial rather than a critical position in the line of executive leadership.*
  - b) Hammond expresses some anxiety over all the campaign promises he made to the people. The party leader responds, “You had to make some promises. By the time they realize you’re not going to keep them, your term will be over.” *All politicians make promises knowing they may not keep them. Their laughter suggests that fooling the people in this way is of little concern.*
  - c) Hammond thanks a congressman for “those unexpected votes from Alabama” and the man replies, “Wait ‘til you get the bill for them!” *The votes from Alabama were bought, not provided because of any real effort on the congressman’s part to convince the people that Hammond was the best man. Rather, he is the man that the party wanted.*
  - d) Hammond tells another politician how thankful he is for his support in securing Hammond’s election. The politician replies, “Don’t mention it. You’ll make the best president the party ever had.” *The statement reinforces the concept of a machine politician—that is, the president serving his party rather than his country.*
3. In what way does the scene with the accredited White House news correspondents reveal Hammond’s woeful inexperience in leadership and therefore his lack of qualifications to be president?  
*Hammond does not at first seem to know about John Bronson, the leader of the unemployed who have camped in the nation’s capital. He states that he considers the rampant unemployment and racketeering/gangsterism as local rather than federal problems. This suggests he does not have a domestic policy plan in place to address these pressing economic and social issues. Hammond frequently uses “the party” and “the president” when stating beliefs, suggesting these are not his own thoughts but those of the political machine that put him in office. Students should note also the “empty” language Hammond uses—talking in generalities rather than identifying specific policy. Examples of this include stating that he will carry the country “from the depths of despondency to the unsullied and sunny heights of prosperity” and that the American people will weather the depression “through the spirit of Valley Forge.”*

4. In your opinion, do the news correspondents admire and/or respect the president? Provide a reason to support your answer.  
*Answers will vary. They make sarcastic comments about the president's optimism, suggesting that they do not believe that "America will rise again" without any government help. One journalist plays solitaire, suggesting boredom and the lack of activity, i.e., nothing to report.*

**Think more about it.** "May the President be quoted?" asks a news correspondent. What does Hammond's reply reveal about his character and his politics? *By telling the press that they cannot quote him, Hammond signals his unwillingness to commit to anything. He is not the person in charge. He is the puppet of the political machine, represented in the film as his "cabinet" or, as he calls them, "the boys."*



**Screen *Gabriel Over the White House*, "The Oval Office"** (Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel).

In this segment, Miss Molloy suggests that Hammond could do "important things" with his pen. His response is to call her an idealist. Then Hammond's nephew arrives, and the president initiates a game of "treasure hunt."

Discuss how the scenes in the Oval Office, both with Miss Molloy and the nephew, reinforce the idea that Hammond is a "machine politician."

*Molloy explains to the president what the papers are on his desk, suggesting he has not read them and indeed, he signs without looking closely at what is written. This shows he is following the machine's directives. Additionally, responses should focus on the contrast of the seriousness of the "breaking news" being broadcast and the president's treasure hunt game with his nephew. Hammond is oblivious to the broadcast, never once reacting to the news report about the dire situation of the nation's poor. Visually, he crawls on his knees with his nephew, an action that communicates his childishness and naivety. Emphasize this key point: playing with a child in the Oval Office is not necessarily a negative thing, but in juxtaposition with the scenes that preceded this, and set against the broadcast about an "army" of disgruntled citizens pleading for help from the White House, the scene communicates a critical weakness of Hammond's presidency.*

**Conclude the activity by discussing the use of satire in the Oval Office scene.** Hammond playing happily with his nephew in the Oval Office is a satirical comment on the federal government's inability and/or unwillingness to hear or act upon the nation's dire circumstances. The Oval Office scene ends with the nephew sitting at the president's desk, stuffing his mouth with marshmallows. Encourage students to comment on what they believe the director (and the film's writers) were communicating to the audience. Prompt further discussion by asking students what Hammond's reckless driving might suggest about his leadership of the country.

## **ACTIVITY D: THE PRESIDENT AWAKENS**

### **ENGAGE**



**Display and discuss PPT slides 14 and 15.** These slides introduce the second social ill affecting the country in 1932—organized crime and racketeering.

- **PPT slide 14: "Bootleg Whiskey, Crime, Dope."** From the 1920s, the drawing is by Winsor McCay. The 18th Amendment made the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages illegal. Passed into law in 1919, prohibition of intoxicating liquors led to an increase in crime throughout the 1920s. McCay's composition also identifies drugs and racketeering (fraudulent money schemes indicated by the tower that reads "Get Rich Quick") as social ills of this decade.
- **PPT slide 15: "Bullet Proof."** By the 1930s, violent gang wars were a social problem that both local and federal governments faced. Published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, this cartoon suggests that the corruption of law enforcement and government officials makes fighting crime futile.

## EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE

**Discuss with students the title of the film, explaining the significance of the angel Gabriel.** Gabriel means “man of God” or “strength of God.” In the Old Testament of the Bible, Gabriel appears in the form of a human man to the prophet Daniel. According to the King James Version, Gabriel states: “O Daniel, I have come now to give you insight and understanding. . . . Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city to stop their transgression, to put an end to sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy Place.”

The title suggests that Gabriel visits Judson Hammond, providing divine guidance in how to manage the country’s “transgressions” (crimes and social ills). Note also that Gabriel’s message to Daniel limits the amount of time allowed for the city to right its wrongdoings.



**Screen *Gabriel Over the White House*, “President Hammond”** (on the Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel).



Discussion questions appear on **PPT slides 16 and 18**.

### GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. How does the filmmaker suggest that a divine presence has entered the president’s bedroom? *Distant trumpet sounds, the curtains lift and fall, and the lighting in the room changes.*
2. One of the first indications that Hammond has changed is how he interacts and speaks with his secretaries, his cabinet, and the press. What are those changes? *He no longer uses the nicknames “Penny” and “Beek” but rather addresses them formally as Miss Molloy and Mr. Beekman. When Miss Molloy first sees him, she calls him Jud and kneels by his chair. His response to her familiarity (placing her hands on his shoulder and knee) is cold. Although he says nothing to her, she backs away. How she reacts to him—calling him “sir,” suggests she sees that he is changed. When he meets with his cabinet, he does not call them “boys” but instead calls them “gentlemen.” He is firm, decisive with the cabinet, refusing to do what the machine asks—call out the army to crush the unemployed veterans who are marching on Washington. He fires Secretary of State Brooks, answers the questions of the press directly without equivocation, and states he wishes to be quoted.*
3. Refer to the images on **PPT slide 17: Graft**. Why does Nick Diamond, the gangster, summon John Bronson to his home? Explain Bronson’s comment, “That ain’t my brand.” *Students should infer from the previous scene with the inspector, who accepted the bribe of cash placed inside the cigarette case, that Diamond is now offering a bribe to Bronson as well. Diamond wants Bronson’s men to maintain their camps because the police will be distracted from Diamond’s criminal activities. Bronson’s response when offered a cigarette indicates he is an honest man who does not associate with gangsters to achieve what he wants.*
4. Who murders Bronson and why? What is the significance of this scene? *Hidden in the back of an ambulance are men who use a machine gun to kill Bronson while he is leading the march. This suggests that the gangster Diamond ordered Bronson’s death, perhaps in part because Bronson refused to do as Diamond asked, and in part because killing Bronson would create chaos and thereby distract the police from Diamond’s criminal activities.*
5. What proposal does the president make to the unemployed veterans who are marching to Washington? *To create an “Army of Construction” to put the unemployed men to work. It will be run in military style, with the government providing food and housing and wages in return for the men’s work in rebuilding the country.*



6. Comment on the composition of the shot on **PPT slide 19: Addressing the Army of the Unemployed**. Why do you think the filmmaker composed the shot in this way? *This is a long shot, showing the crowd of men who are looking toward Hammond. The use of a long shot not only establishes the setting but also the significance of Hammond himself. All eyes are on him. While the subject of the statue is not clearly shown (some students may suggest George Washington), statues are generally erected to honor an individual for his or her noble or courageous actions. Showing Hammond standing below the statue in much the same pose suggests that he, too, is noble and courageous, a patriot.*

**Think more about it.** When Miss Molloy gives the president his speech to Congress on his proposed Construction Army, he asks “Who wrote this?” She tells him he did. What does this exchange suggest about Hammond’s newfound ideas and moral righteousness? *He has not seen the speech before, and so clearly has not written it. But again, the audience hears the distant sound of a trumpet and the light in the room changes, suggesting the presence of Gabriel—or whatever force is guiding Hammond. Hammond responds as if listening to a voice that neither Miss Molloy nor the audience can hear. From this, students may infer that Gabriel, not Hammond, has written the speech. Prompt further discussion by asking students whether Judson Hammond is really a changed man. Or has he become the figurehead and spokesperson for some other being or force?*

**Comment on the music used in the final scene in this segment.** “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” lyrics written by Julia Ward Howe during the American Civil War, has always been considered a patriotic song of justice. It is also a song of revelation: “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” As this segment ends, Hammond sees a group of people gathered along the fence outside the White House singing this song. The singing continues as Hammond turns out the light and walks across the room. The scene fades out on the bust of Abraham Lincoln. This fade-out and the soundtrack work together to reinforce the idea of Hammond’s “divine” influence. One interpretation is that God is on America’s side. God wants Hammond to lead and to succeed in righting the country’s transgressions.

**Conclude the lesson.** Ask students to discuss if *Gabriel Over the White House* is a religious movie, supporting their opinions with specific details. While the title has a religious allusion, the film itself does not dwell on any form of religion. As film critic and political journalist Jeff Greenfield has stated about this film, there is no “army of the religious” marching to Washington. Greenfield believes the subtle use of blowing curtains and a faint, distant trumpet is simply a plot device to indicate Hammond’s awakening to the political realities of the time.

## LESSON 3

### The Power of the Presidency

*In Gabriel, the message is clear: democracy and a separated system of checks and balances are ineffective and impractical in times of economic crisis and national emergency... public consent and the machinations of representative government may be alright when things are fine, but to fight bootleggers, keep our allies and enemies in line, and defeat depressions, we should empower a benevolent dictator to take the reins of power and act according to his own vision.*

– MARK SACHLEBEN AND KEVAN M. YENERALL, SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE: UNDERSTANDING POLITICS THROUGH FILM AND TELEVISION

### ACTIVITY E: MARTIAL LAW

#### ENGAGE

Review the definition of impeachment. The passage below is from the U.S. Constitution, Article II, section 4.

*“The President, Vice President and all Civil Officers of the United States, shall be removed from Office on Impeachment for, and Conviction of, Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors.”*

Share this information on the process of impeachment, as published on the “History, Art & Archives” website of the U.S. House of Representatives.

*The Constitution gives the House of Representatives the sole power to impeach an official, and it makes the Senate the sole court for impeachment trials. The power of impeachment is limited to removal from office but also provides for a removed officer to be disqualified from holding future office. Fines and potential jail time for crimes committed while in office are left to civil courts.*

*The House brings impeachment charges against federal officials as part of its oversight and investigatory responsibilities.*

Two presidents have been impeached but neither were removed from office. On February 24, 1868, Andrew Johnson became the first president impeached by the House. Among the charges against him was violating the Tenure of Office Act. This was based on an 1867 law that prevented a president from firing a member of his cabinet without Senate approval. Johnson had fired his Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton. The Senate, however, acquitted Johnson by just one vote. Therefore, although impeached, he remained in office.

On December 19, 1998, the house impeached William (Bill) Clinton. His charges were perjury and obstruction of justice. He had allegedly misled a grand jury about his extramarital affair with a member of his staff, and persuaded others to lie about the affair. Again, although impeached, the Senate acquitted him.

PPT

**Display and discuss PPT slide 20: Notice of Termination.** Would this have been an impeachable offense? The tenure of office law was changed in 1926, allowing the president to fire those individuals who have been appointed by the president, but not those who were elected into office. This pertains to state governments as well. Although the president can fire a cabinet member, he or she cannot fire a senator, a congressional representative, or a state governor.

#### EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE

**Review the concept of martial law.** *Martial law* is the suspension of civil authority and the imposition of military authority. The military acts as the police, the courts, and the legislature. During states of emergency, such as natural disasters or an invasion of the country, martial law may be declared.

**ASK:** Can a president declare the country under martial law?

*One argument is that, as the commander-in-chief of the military, the president can declare martial law. Abraham Lincoln did so during the Civil War. However, the Supreme Court ruled that Lincoln's imposition of martial law was unconstitutional.*

### Share this additional information about the Supreme Court's position on martial law.

The President can declare martial law when circumstances warrant it: When the civil authority cannot operate, then martial law is not only constitutional, it would be necessary: "If, in foreign invasion or civil war, the courts are actually closed, and it is impossible to administer criminal justice according to law, then, on the theatre of active military operations, where war really prevails, there is a necessity to furnish a substitute for the civil authority, thus overthrown, to preserve the safety of the army and society; and as no power is left but the military, it is allowed to govern by martial rule until the laws can have their free course. As necessity creates the rule, so it limits its duration; for, if this government is continued after the courts are reinstated, it is a gross usurpation of power. Martial rule can never exist where the courts are open, and in the proper and unobstructed exercise of their jurisdiction. It is also confined to the locality of actual war."

**Review the 18th and 21st Amendments to the Constitution.** Ratified in 1919, the 18th amendment prohibited the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors into and out of the United States. Prohibition ushered in a decade of racketeering and crime. In December, 1933 (and therefore after this movie was made), the 21st amendment repealed the 18th amendment, making the sale and consumption of alcohol once again legal. However, many states remained "dry" and the 18th amendment made illegal the transportation of alcohol into these dry states.



**Screen *Gabriel Over the White House*, "Dictator Hammond"** (Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel).



Discussion questions appear on **PPT slide 21**.

### GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. What does Hammond ask of Congress?  
*Four billion dollars to stimulate the economy. This includes funding his proposed Construction Army. When he learns of a movement to impeach him, he withdraws his request for money and instead asks the Congress to declare a state of national emergency and to adjoin the Congress until normal conditions are restored. He will then assume full control of the country.*
2. How does Hammond respond when accused of being a dictator?  
*He argues his intention is for the good of the country and cites Thomas Jefferson's definition of democracy as a government of the greatest good for the greatest number. This point in the film is where the concept of a benevolent dictator is put into words.*
3. How does the film show that Hammond has imposed martial law in the country?  
*The newspaper headline indicates that Congress accedes to Hammond's request to adjoin Congress and put full control of the government in his hands. The headline also includes the phrase "Hammond Dictator." The scenes that follow, especially the establishment of a military unit to combat racketeering, where the military is both the police and the court, is clearly indicative of martial law. Note that after this point in the film, there is no presence of Congress or other elected officials. Everyone surrounding the president has been appointed by him.*
4. Explain how Hammond intends to "muscle in" on Nick Diamond's "racket," and how does Diamond react?  
*He opens a government-run store to sell liquor legally. Diamond firebombs the store and attacks the White House itself.*

PPT

**Think more about it.** Comment on the composition of the shot on **PPT slide 22: Firing Squad**. What message do you believe the filmmaker is communicating to the audience through this composition?

*Answers will vary but should focus on the background elements of both the Statue of Liberty and the steamship. Some students may suggest that the execution of the racketeers is a patriotic act. Others may respond that the Statue of Liberty as well as the steamship are symbols of our nation's immigrant history. Remind students of the earlier scene between Hammond and Diamond in the Oval Office. When President Hammond read Diamond's biography, the audience learned that Diamond was an immigrant, but his "American Dream" was contrary to the tenets of democracy.*



**Conclude the activity by screening "Notorious Men"** (on the Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel). This is a re-screening of the scene where Nick Diamond meets with the president in the Oval Office. Contrast this scene with the earlier scene of Hammond playing hide-and-seek with his nephew in the Oval Office. How has Hammond changed? Comment specifically on the movement and soundtrack. *In the earlier scene, both Hammond and his nephew are in constant motion, playing the game. The soundtrack includes not only their childish banter but also the more serious reporting heard on the radio. In this scene, there is very little movement. Diamond taps the chair, studies the bust of Lincoln, but does not utter any sounds. There is no radio. When Hammond enters, he is decisive. He confronts Diamond. The scene ends with the presence of the secret service men whom Diamond initially believes have appeared in order to harm him.*

Extend the discussion by asking students to discuss the loss of civil liberties as a result of President Hammond's executive action. According to the movie (and President Hammond), the source of all the evil and corruption in America seems to be gangsters like Diamond. To solve this social ill, the president creates government-run, and therefore, legal distribution of alcohol, cutting into Diamond's profits. The president also creates a military police force with the power to apprehend, try, and punish the gangsters. One civil liberty taken away is the right to due process under the law, to be tried and judged by a jury of one's peers. Encourage deeper thinking by asking students if the ends (elimination of organized crime) justify the means. *Answers will vary. Accept all reasonable responses.*

## **ACTIVITY F: "THOSE DEBTS HAVE GOT TO BE PAID"**

### **ENGAGE**

PPT

**Display PPT slide 23: Liberty Bond Posters, 1917.** Explain briefly the critical issue of reparation of war debts in 1932. Allies who fought against Germany in the Great War secured loans from foreign countries, including America, to purchase needed war supplies and armaments. The United States government funded the loans through Liberty Bonds purchased by American citizens.

After the war, the reparation of debts became a complicated and complex issue. Cancellation of the debt was hotly debated. The debate continued throughout the 1920s. The worldwide depression that occurred in 1929 complicated the issue even more. Foreign countries could not pay their debts. And yet, some countries did indeed fund new armaments for defense. By 1932, the money owed to the United States totaled more than ten billion dollars, with additional billions due in interest. In that year, the countries of Europe met at Lausanne, Switzerland to discuss the debt question.

### **EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE**



**Screen *Gabriel Over the White House*, "Global Disarmament"** (Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel).

PPT

Discussion questions appear on **PPT slides 24 and 25**.

## **GUIDED DISCUSSION**

1. What is Hammond's strategy in broadcasting over the radio the international debt summit? *He believes the delegates from the various countries will speak more honestly if they know the world is listening. He also states that the United States entered the Great War in order to put an end to secret diplomacy.*
2. What arguments for cancelling the debts are given by the delegates from Germany, Belgium, and France?  
*For Germany to pay its debts, it must raise its taxes on the people and they may revolt. Belgium needs the money to create armaments to protect itself from another invasion. France loaned money to the Americans during their war of independence from Great Britain. Prompt further discussion by asking students to comment on the persuasiveness of these arguments.*
3. Hammond states that if the debts are not paid by the foreign countries, then the burden will fall on the American people. They cannot pay their debts and the debts of the other nations as well. How then does Hammond convince the delegates to fall into line with his wishes? Comment on both his words and the display of military power in this scene.  
*While he has been speaking, the camera has framed Hammond with radio microphones in the foreground and battleships on parade in the background. The parade of naval ships in particular is a show of strength. He then signals for a military demonstration to impress upon the delegates the threat of global destruction and the futility of building bigger and greater armaments. Rather than spending money on defense, the countries can use that money for the greater good of all people. He emphasizes the futility of war itself, saying the next war will annihilate the human race.*
4. What is the significance of President Hammond using the feather pen to sign the Washington Covenant?  
*It is the same pen Lincoln used when signing the Emancipation Proclamation, a detail provided much earlier in the film. The suggestion is that by signing with the pen, Hammond is freeing the world from war.*
5. After his collapse, Hammond slowly returns to consciousness. What is the first indication that the "old President Hammond" is back?  
*He calls Miss Molloy "Pandy, old gal." This is a return to his informal and familiar way of interacting with her. Prompt further discussion by asking why the film's storyline had him regain consciousness at all. Why did the filmmaker want the audience to know that the "spell" was broken? Accept all reasonable responses.*

**Think more about it.** Why do you think the screenwriter decided to have Hammond's collapse occur just as he finished signing the Washington Covenant? Why not allow him to continue to live? *Answers will vary. If the premise is that a higher being or spiritual force was informing Hammond's thoughts and actions, then once world peace has been achieved, his work on Earth is complete. Hammond's physical presence is no longer needed. Accept all reasonable responses.*

**Conclude the activity by assigning students to choose one of the two writing assignments below.**

- *Assignment 1.* The movie ends with President Hammond’s death, but not before the audience learns that he has once again become the man he was prior to his automobile accident. Write a short essay explaining what may have happened if Hammond had not died. Would he have continued in his role as president with “broad executive powers?” Or would he have relinquished his absolute powers and returned the country’s control to the three branches of government? Support your response with specific reasons or details. *Accept all reasonable and supported responses.*
- *Assignment 2.* Miss Molloy briefly explains to Beekman that the angel Gabriel is God’s messenger and that he is not always an angel of wrath. In this way, the script informs those in the audience who may not have been familiar with the Biblical reference. However, it is likely that audiences in the 1930s would have understood the allusion. That may not be true for audiences of the 21st century. Imagine remaking this story as a movie for contemporary audiences. How would you handle the Gabriel plot device? Who or what would be the external power or force that intervenes to solve the country’s ills? And what would those social ills be? Provide specific details. *Accept all reasonable and supported responses.*

## ENRICHMENT



**Screen “A Discussion with Jeff Greenfield”** (on the Module 5 Supplemental Clip Reel). This film clip is excerpted from a longer discussion with journalist Jeff Greenfield about *Gabriel Over the White House*. Greenfield is an award-winning television journalist and author focusing on politics, media, and culture. In this film segment, he provides comments on the influence of the film’s producer, William Randolph Hearst, on the film’s script; in particular, the populist rhetoric spoken by President Hammond. At the time this film was being made, Hearst was an enthusiastic supporter of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

## WRITING EXTENSION — First Person Essay

PPT

**View PPT slide 26: Characters and Conflict—Gabriel Over the White House.** Ask students to imagine themselves to be the character described on the slide. Explore your personal beliefs about the conflicting situation. Express yourself in a personal letter or a diary entry, providing specific details to support your response.