

12 Angry Men Is More Relevant than Ever in the Age of Trump

Sixty years after its initial release, the ultimate American morality tale still has lessons we'd do well to heed.

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APRIL 13, 2017 8:06 AM

12 Angry Men is earnest, sincere, and 60 years old today—an admirable if slightly stale product of its time. But **Donald Trump's** presidency—and his assault on the basic liberal value of justice—have lent the film a new relevance. What once felt creaky and old-fashioned now burns bright with fresh outrage—and serves as a disconcerting reminder of our own regression.

The 12 ordinary (white) men who congregate in Sidney Lumet's film have been given the God-like power of determining the ultimate fate of teenage street kid—a minority accused of murdering his father. Their leader, initially, is Juror No. 3—a sour, authoritarian bully played by Lee J. Cobb, who is ready, even eager to send the boy to die. Then Henry Fonda enters as bleeding-heart Juror No. 8, who—in what can only be deemed an outrageous fantasy—uses logic and facts to convince a group of skeptical, angry strangers to agree with him.

Cobb's sharply drawn antagonist at least has a legal obligation to mask the rage and racism behind his desire to execute a poor kid. Trump, meanwhile, didn't even need to be on the jury of the notorious 1989 Central Park 5 case—in which five black teenagers were falsely accused of raping and beating a wealthy white jogger—to determine that the defendants were guilty. Now a president who backs measures like a Muslim immigration ban, Trump has broadened the conversation around race in this country to empower the Juror No. 3s of the world. Like Cobb's villain, Trump's primary motivation often seems to be a sour, unshakable conviction that a non-white person accused of something is almost assuredly guilty—and that we, as white people, owe it to “real Americans” (i.e, other white people) to punish them.

At first, Fonda's impassioned liberal faces an uphill battle, as impassioned liberals often do. But his character keeps picking away at the state's case, to Cobb's increasing rage. The pressure of deciding a man's fate reveals the jurors' true character, particularly in the case of Juror No. 10 (Ed Begley)—

who apoplectically condemns the accused not on the facts of the trial, but his sour, hateful certainty about the true nature of “them.” When the racist juror angrily insists, “I’m sick and tired of facts,” he could be [Kellyanne Conway](#).

The juror appeals to the other white men on the basis of racial resentment, saying that bad behavior “is born in” that nebulous “them.” The more worked up he gets, the more repulsive his words sound—and the more his fellow jurors reject both his argument and his entire worldview. Gradually, they stand and literally turn their backs on No. 10. It’s a touching scene, and more than a little heartbreaking in the context of 2017—where our own Juror No. 10 was rewarded with the highest position in the land.

Yes, it’s depressing that ordinary white men from a black-and-white film released more than a half century ago have a more nuanced and progressive attitude toward racism than the majority of voters in 2016—in a [handful of swing states](#), anyway. But the passionate conviction of *12 Angry Men* is inspiring as well. After all, when Trump defied the legal system with his Muslim ban, the American public did not march in lockstep behind him. Instead, many turned their backs on Trump, metaphorically speaking—then took to the streets.