

Thursday, February 17, 2005.
Alexandria, Louisiana.

GRAVEL AND EASTWOOD BOTH INVOLVED IN MAJOR BATTLES

Two giant figures on the American scene are each facing huge challenges. Two real superstars in their respective fields. One a huge movie star. The other for many years, one of the nation's top criminal lawyers. The ever popular actor and the sought after attorney. The King of the tough guys and the kingmaker of Governors. Dirty Harry and Clarence Darrow. One is fighting for his reputation. The other is fighting for his life.

The movie star is everybody's hero-Clint Eastwood. And if you are not aware of it, his new movie "Million-Dollar Baby," is a major hit, critically acclaimed, a solid contender for best picture of the year, and other Oscar accolades. Clint portrays a boxing trainer, who takes on the job of making a female fighter (Hilary Swank) a champion. He is pictured in the movie as a regular churchgoer who believes in hard work, rejects crass materialism, values honor and loyalty and wrestles with soul wrenching spiritual issues in an honest, mature fashion. Surely no one should have a problem with this tender, beautifully made movie about faith and hard earned redemption. It's the kind of film we would like to see more of.

Well, but not everyone feels that way. There are some folks on the conservative fringe who believe that Clint has betrayed their cause. According to these right-wing adversaries, Clint is espousing a "left-wing diatribe" that supports euthanasia. And oh, do they pile it on. Conservative radio commentator Michael Medved has led the charge was numerous interviews, calling the film "an insufferable, manipulative right-to-die movie." And Rush Limbaugh dismisses the film as little more than "liberal propaganda." Debbie Schlusel, another conservative talk-show host, claimed the film supports "killing the handicapped, literally putting their lights out." And Ted Baehr, head of the Christian Film and Television Commission, described the film to Sean Hannity as "very anti-Catholic and anti-Christian."

Remember now that Clint is a pretty hard-core Republican. He was elected as such, serving as mayor of Carmel, California in the late 1980s, and was a Nixon appointee to the National Council of the Arts. Some in Hollywood called him a fascist when the first Dirty Harry movie came out. Some left-winger.

What seems to gall all these moral pontificators is when our young boxer, who mesmerizes us through the whole movie, ends up in a hospital with a spinal-cord injury and wants to die. Clint, who in the movie goes to Mass every day, painfully struggles with the question of assisted suicide. But there certainly is no position taken, and the final result pushes our hero out of boxing forever. Saying that this movie endorses assisted suicide is like concluding that the movie "Ray" approves of Ray Charles' real-life heroin addiction.

Clint is openly disturbed that those “who expound from the right of American values” could reject a movie about a heroine who is “willing to pull herself up by the bootstraps, to work hard and persevere no matter what to realize her dream. That all sounds like Americana to me,” says Clint.

It’s obvious from his public comments that Clint is stoic but disturbed. And rightly so. “I never thought about the political side of this when making the film,” Clint says. “And maybe I’m getting to the age when I’m starting to be senile or nostalgic or both, but people are so angry now. You used to be able to disagree with people and still be friends. Now you hear these talk shows, and everyone who believes differently from you is a moron and an idiot-both on the right and left.”

If you view the film objectively, Clint is saying that boxing has consequences, and though many of us would like to think otherwise, some crises do not have black-and-white solutions, and there’s not always a happy ending.

I had dinner with Clint Eastward once. It was at a theater convention in New Orleans, back in the mid-1980s. He was making the movie “Tightrope” at the time, and the conversation ranged from work-out schedules (he exercises two hours a day, seven days a week) to sharing mutual stories about our kids. “You got pictures?” he asked me. I proudly pulled out snap shots of my four children. He was curious as to what political party I belonged to, and told me he is Republican. But he said he always supported the best candidate, and left me with the impression that he was more in line with the libertarian creed of “less government.”

“Million Dollar Baby” reflects Clint’s philosophy that runs through many of his movies. That we are challenged to think about the precariousness of life and how we handle it. He has never hesitated to provoke us, stir our passion, prick our conscience and test our firm held beliefs. Life isn’t fair and balanced. (I can tell you something about that.) This may not appease the right wing fringe, or be a politically correct pipe dream, but it’s simply a reflection of being realistic. Kudos to Clint for shooting us straight, as he has through his whole career. He’s certainly the good guy in this fight.

When American history is compiled in years to come, a towering figure from Louisiana will be Camille Gravel. His influence on the legal profession and the political landscape of the state has been overwhelming. He has been, for many years, hands down one of the best criminal lawyers in the country. But he now faces the biggest challenge he will ever undertake. His own. Camille is confined to an Alexandria , Louisiana hospital bed fighting to recover from major heart surgery. He is 90 years old.

Many would be stunned at how full and complete a life he led. He has always been a lawyer’s lawyer, called on time and time again by attorneys throughout the country for his legal counsel and advice. Most of the Louisiana governors during the past 60 years have had him by their side. He served as executive counsel to both Governors John McKeithen and Edwin Edwards. He wrote a good bit of the present Louisiana

Constitution, passed in 1973. Numerous judges owe their positions on both the federal and state bench to the efforts and support they received from Camille.

He was a close friend of President John F. Kennedy, and the President seriously considered appointing Camille as attorney general. There is a marvelous story as to how Camille's relationship with Kennedy infuriated then Governor Earl Long. The governor led a delegation that included Camille to the 1956 Democratic convention being held in Chicago. Kennedy was a candidate for vice president, since the position had been thrown open by presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson. Earl Long strongly supported Senator Estes Kefauver from Tennessee. The governor decided to leave the convention early, and gave instructions to Camille and Judge Edmund Reggie to support Kefauver.

The Massachusetts delegation sat side-by-side with the Louisiana delegates, and Camille struck up a friendship with Kennedy. Despite Earl Long's instructions, Camille supported Kennedy for Vice President. Needless to say, the governor was infuriated. And so Camille damaged his relationship with the governor but made a lasting alliance with the man who would be President.

Camille has been for many years, a loyal alumnus of Notre Dame. He has spent untold hours and money supporting the work of the Catholic Church. The father of 11 children, it is an understatement to say that he's being overwhelmed by family alone in their support of his recovery. And friends from all over are calling and making the trip to Alexandria.

He's lived a full life, and all those who know him well also know he still has a lot of living to do. Camille is loved and respected by many people all over Louisiana, and all over the country. I hope you'll join many of us with your thoughts and prayers for this Louisiana icon. Camille needs our help now, but many of us will need him, hopefully, in the months and years to come.

There is naught better to be
With noble souls of company:
There is naught dearer than to wend
With good friends faithful to the end.
This is the love whose fruit is sweet;
Therefore to abide within is meet.
Mahabharata (B.C.400)



Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown