

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Directed by Wolfgang Petersen

Produced by Jeff Apple

Distributed by Columbia Pictures

Released in 1993

For Clint Eastwood's Frank Horrigan, the thirty years that have passed since Kennedy's death have not been pleasant. Many Americans feel like he does, that something intangible, with overtones of hope and purpose, has been lost. For many, the transition from age 25 to 55 is fraught with disappointment, regardless of who's president, but for Horrigan, Kennedy's loss was the direct cause of his sadness. He could have saved the president, but just stood there and stared while his hero's head was obliterated. Kennedy is gone, and so are Horrigan's wife and kid and the America he loved.

He doesn't seem to care much for the current president. He definitely is flabbergasted by the priorities of the politicos—make the president look good first, and offer protection second. For Horrigan is still in Dealey Plaza, staring at Kennedy's head. He sees no reason for accommodation. But everyone else has moved on. No president has been killed in thirty years. But to Horrigan, it's still happening.

So when John Malkovich's "Booth" starts making harassing phone calls, Horrigan is stoked. Now he has a chance to prove he can take a bullet for the president. But this game of wits isn't about the target—this game is a contest between Leary and Horrigan, and the president's life provides a basis for keeping score. Leary makes him wonder, *Do I have what it takes?* Without Leary, Horrigan would die feeling like a failure.

Given this, there is a missed opportunity once the president has been saved. Leary, who is a psychopath, is possessed of considerable intelligence and skill. He saved Frank there on the rooftops of D.C. He kills everyone else, including Frank's partner, because he doesn't respect them. He kills to preserve his identity and keep the hope of assassination alive. But without Frank, there would be nothing—no irony, no symbolism, no game to punctuate the dreariness.

Yet Frank refuses to throw Leary a bone. He never shows him respect. When Leary is dangling from the elevator, Frank is home free. If he pulls him up he'll be at risk again, but with both of Leary's hands occupied, nothing can happen. Frank's obligation to protect the president and Frank's quest for personal redemption are centered on Leary. Why not thank him for making this a contest?

All through the movie, from Leary's first phone call to his retrieval of the bullet at the fund-raiser, *In The Line of Fire* asks us to applaud Leary's ingenuity and dedication to his mission. And there's more to Leary than just his play for posterity. Yes, he killed his best friend, but that friend arrived at his home on a mission to kill Leary. He bought a \$1,000 wheelchair for a colleague in design. And Leary never lies to Horrigan. So even though he's no pussy cat, there is something to admire in Leary; we may not want him to kill the president, but we sure want him to get off a good shot.

AN ILLUMINED ILLUSIONS ESSAY BY IAN C. BLOOM

So why not acknowledge the duality of the story? We're asked to root for Leary. Without him there'd be no plot, no conflict, to entertain us. But more important, without Leary our hero wouldn't have a chance at redemption.

Who would ever know what Frank says to Leary while Leary is hanging on for dear life? Frank doesn't have to keep his radio engaged. And if Frank murders Leary, no one will know. It would be especially chilling if Horrigan thanked him for their game, and Leary expressed a desire to be pulled up, to which Horrigan cautioned, "No one can know what I just said."

"I won't tell," a frightened Leary replies.

"You're right," Horrigan deadpans, letting go of Leary.

Horrigan is already conflicted. To make overt that implied selfish desire for redemption would be a great surprise and perfectly illustrate the irony that Leary keeps talking about throughout the story.

Who knows? If something is holding this story back, the likely culprit is the Secret Service. This was the first film to have their complete cooperation. But their cooperation came at the cost of script approval. Obviously the Secret Service doesn't care about drama. They care about accuracy and p.r. It does them no good to help bring to the screen a character with such a battered psyche that he would court a potential assassin to punctuate the dreariness in his *own* life.

This is the great dilemma: Without Secret Service cooperation, the producers would not have access to the equipment, locations, and expertise that help make this film so compelling.

Horrigan is what the Secret Service wants American to see. He's a loveable rogue. He's competent, puts protection over politics, and is selfless rather than self-possessed. Most of all, he's Clint Eastwood!

We'd have a better character if Horrigan could be portrayed as double-minded and reckless while stumbling along on his road to redemption. But the movie wouldn't have gotten made. So why demand perfection when the real choice is between excellence and non-existence?