

# The Best of Enemies (2019)



Ann Atwater & C.P. Ellis hate each other so that they do not like even to look at each other. c) STXfilms

Do not be confused by the title, you who are long-time readers of VP-I did review a [Best of Enemies](#) back in 2015, but it was a documentary about the intense feud between William F. Buckley and Gore Vidal. The new film with the same title, directed by/writer Robin Bissell, is based on the Osha Gray Davidson's book. Its full title is *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South*, the story of how a KKK head and an African American activist slowly became friends during the racial crisis in Durham, North Carolina in 1971. It is a tale so unlikely that had this been a novel, it would have been rejected as "unrealistic."

Heading an impeccable cast are Taraji P. Henson and Sam Rockwell, she playing Ann Atwater, the blunt-talking advocate for decent housing for blacks, and he C.P. Ellis, president of the Durham chapter of United Klans of America.

As we see at the beginning of the film, Ann Atwater is an in your face advocate, head of Operation Breakthrough, a group seeking good housing and fair treatment for Durham's black citizens. We hear her telling someone on the phone, "Get your ass down to City Hall tonight! I'd BETTER see your face

lookin' Black and ANGRY!" She's only slightly more polite with a white council member when he tries to ignore her by taking a phone call while she is talking, and she snatches the phone from him so she can get his attention.

The City Council members and Mayor Carvie Oldham (Bruce McGill) tolerate Ann, but have no intention of giving up their Jim Crow laws and customs that undergird their way of life. When the African American school is devastated by a fire and the council refuses to allow blacks to join the students at the white school, the NAACP comes to Ann's aid, securing a court order that the school be desegregated.

Durham is a tinderbox, with neither the city council nor the blacks led by Ann ready to compromise. The local politicians, not wanting the onus of giving in to the Federal court order, bring in from Raleigh's Shaw University professor Bill Riddick (Babou Ceesay) who has a reputation of bringing hostile people together by means of a ["charrette."](#) A new term for me, this is a process adapted from civic planning in which advocates of all sides of an issue are brought together for a specific amount of time and charged with coming up with an agreement that incorporates all of their ideas through discussion, active listening, and compromising.

The council agrees to Riddick's plan called "Save Our Schools," or SOS. A large group of citizens from all sides of the issue will meet for ten all-day sessions (9 A.M. to 9 P.M.), come up with a plan, and either adopt or reject it by a vote at the end. Riddick is both a quick learner and an extremely patient mediator, convincing the unwilling Atwater and Ellis to co-chair the ten sessions. Each hates the other, but consent in order to look out for the interests of their constituencies. Riddick slyly convinces Klansman Ellis to join, for example, by suggesting that a liberal white man might take the job if he didn't.

The study group is a large one so as to include as many

people with varying views as possible who will be sure to raise all the issues and feelings. The sessions turn out to be stormy at times, given the embedded traditions of everyone. In one confrontation in a parking lot Ann holds out her Bible and says this is her security, to which C.P. says that he has a copy and has read it, to which she retorts that it says, "the same God that made you made me." How these two moved from hatred to grudging understanding and respect to one of deep friendship (the two of them appearing together for many years to advocate racial harmony) is truly an astounding story that inspires hope, even in today's polarized society.

A strength of the script is that it does not make the crusading Ann into a saint or C.P into the stereotypical Southern racist demon. During the Civil Rights era many Northerners looked down on Southern whites as almost evil incarnate, and the latter were depicted as such in some films, such as *Mississippi Burning*. Ann is as prejudiced in her own way against C.P. and the intransigent City Council members as they are against her. C.P. is shown as a family man who cares deeply for his more open-minded wife Mary (Anne Heche) and four children, especially for their Down syndrome teenage son Larry. Although they have had to place Larry in a home, the father frequently visits the lad.

Like his father, C.P. is a card-carrying KKK member, which, he says almost poignantly, gives him a sense of belonging to something bigger than himself. This is important for a blue collar man who works with his hands at his gas station and will never be accepted by the white elite of the city. Indeed, the film spells out well that class distinctions divide the whites almost as firmly as race separates all whites from the blacks. Businessman Carvie Oldham will never invite C.P. to his home or to a White Citizens' Council meeting.

Gandhi and Dr. King both taught that love or good will in the form of nonviolence was the only weapon that could bring peace to an unjust, hostile situation, and we see this in the film.

It is an unexpected act of kindness that begins to transform C.P. His son Larry lives in a care facility, and when another patient is moved into his room, the boy becomes hysterical. The parents beg that the new resident be moved or that Larry be given a private room, but the authorities refuse. When Ann learns of this, she uses her influence with a key staff member to allow the boy to have his own room. Mary Ellis takes the unprecedented step of going to Ann's home to thank her personally. Like his wife, C.P. is surprised by the kind act of his adversary—and a bit confused, so when he mentions it to her, Ann replies that she didn't do it for him. She too is still infected with her deep hostility toward whites.

Another factor working on C.P.'s conscience is his attempt to meet and influence the liberal white member of their charrette, hardware store owner Lee Trombley ([John Gallagher Jr.](#)). C.P. wants to influence him, but he has trouble catching the man at work. Instead, he is surprised to find a black man is the store manager. "How could Lee trust a black to run his store?" C.P. asks when he does get to talk with Lee. To which the latter tells how the man saved his life when the two were comrades in Vietnam. He says he would trust his store and his life to his friend. When C.P. speaks with the black man, his tone of voice is not of the usual scorn, as he tells him he respects him for serving our country. (I think his name is Archie Cox [Aaron Smalls], though I cannot determine this for sure by the extensive list of credits, and the dozen or more reviews that I have read do not even mention this important incident)

It is no spoiler to reveal the outcome of the vote on the charrette's proposal to integrate Durham's schools. The film manages to add to the drama by having C.P. vote after enough of the whites have voted "No" so that it is apparent his vote will be crucial. Lee, of course, has voted for the plan, but the other liberal white member of the panel, Maddy Mays (Caitlen Mehner) votes "No" because late one night two

Klansmen had invaded her home and threatened her with rape and murder if she voted for the plan. Before he casts his vote C.P. makes a brief speech in which he quotes the Klan's official motto, "Non silba sed anthar," which translates to "Not self, but others." He now realizes that 'the others' is far larger and more inclusive than he had thought before.

There is a cross resulting from C.P.'s decision to vote "Yes"—the loss of most of his white friends and even a fire that threatens the destruction of his gas station, but he finds there are compensations. Indeed, the ending might be a bit over the top for realists, but I still found it heartening. It even reminded me of the ending of *Field of Dreams*, though this one takes place during daylight hours.

Some critics have denounced the film, the same ones charging that this it is one of those films favoring the story of the white character over the black's, as in *The Green Book* or *Driving Miss Daisy*. There is truth in this—we learn far more about the private life of C.P. Ellis than we do about single mother Ann Atwaters. We are not shown her home or much of her relationship with her daughters. Despite this imbalance, I believe this is a worthy film because it shows an alternative to strident shouting and denunciation in dealing with conflict. C.P. Ellis has the longer of the journeys of transformation, but Ann Atwater also moved from seeing him as a bigoted racist to a father who anguished over the plight of his hurting son. Her transformation is an example of what Gandhi wrote, "Be the change you are trying to create." Hollywood, like the media, typically is drawn to stories of violence when it comes to stories of conflict, so it is refreshing to come across a film exploring an alternative to violence.

One further note that might be of interest to you preachers. I saw the film a few days before Easter, one of the texts this year being Isaiah 65:17-25. I had already decided to base my sermon on this text rather than the usual gospel narrative, so

this text was very much on my mind when I watched the movie. I revised the last part of my sermon "When the Wolf and the Lamb Eat from the Same Dish," which dealt more with the results of the Resurrection than the historical event itself, to include the film as a visual parable of verse 25. In the passage the prophet is reassuring the Jews who have returned from their Babylonian exile that a bright future awaits them—for Christians, their promised period of prosperity can be seen as a precursor of Easter. The prophet ends the passage with a second rendering of the poem in which hostile animals—a wolf and a lamb—live in harmony, the predator eating with the victim at the same trough. Thus I saw C.P. as the wolf and Ann as the lamb, brought together by the patient Riddick, his role of mediator making him a fitting stand-in for Christ. While not bringing in the Kingdom of God, the vote to integrate the schools did move from the Good Friday of segregation to the Easter-like equality of opportunity for both races.

The film may have its flaws, but it is one I highly recommend, especially for those of you concerned with social justice.

For the 6  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute background video on the film see the YouTube "The True Story Behind The Best of Enemies by clicking [here](#). It includes clips seen at the end of the movie, excerpts in which the real C.P. Ellis and Ann Atwater speak of their friendship and anti-racism work together.

One further thought, so please indulge me. The name of one of my heroes of my younger days, Will Campbell, kept surfacing in my mind as I was writing the above, so I want to mention this incredible man of grace because he famously met with a grand dragon of the KKK and was roundly criticised for it during the days of the Civil Rights movement. Campbell was prompted by a North Carolina television journalist to come to his state and become acquainted with some Klan members on a one-to-one basis. Campbell did so, discovering a common humanity with a KKK grand dragon, but this did not set well with his fellow activists, as he relates in his memoir *Brother*

*to a Dragonfly*. Many thought he had gone over to the enemy, some of their charges being, "Fascist pig! How can you say you're a preacher and think like that? Mississippi redneck!"\* In another book Campbell relates that he told the story of his getting along well talking with the Klan member at a CR meeting in the North, and the crowd booed him. It seems that liberals too find the unconditional love that Christ calls for a very difficult path to follow. Will Campbell was one of those prophets who drew the ire of both his fellow white Mississippians and sometimes that of black activists, especially those considered radicals. It is interesting that the actual Ann Atwater mentions in one of the end clips that she had been accused of selling out by working with the Klan member.

\* See the Christian Century article by highlighting and clicking [here](#), or Campbell's book itself, pp.241-250.

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the May issue of Visual Parables.*