

The Congressman (2016)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 38 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 3.5

...you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants...

Leviticus 25:10b

Co-director Robert J. Mrazek (with Jared Martin) also wrote the script for this his first movie. His subject, the U.S. House of Representatives, is a subject he knows well. For ten years—1983-1993—he was U.S. Congressman from New York's 3rd District on Long Island. Not only was he the author of some significant legislation, but also as a Democrat he was active in the effort to prevent President Reagan from funding the Nicaraguan terrorist group known as the Contras. His film might not reach the heights of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, but for those who love *The West Wing* series it will meet a need for a political story that is not steeped in cynicism or despair.

We first see just the feet of Maine's U.S. Congressman Charlie Winship (Treat Williams). While all of the rest of the U.S. Representatives stand and piously place their hands over their hearts and recite together the Pledge of Allegiance, our dear Congressman has his feet propped up on his desk while he reads a newspaper. Someone makes a video showing all of him, and then posts it on a social media platform. The video goes viral, and soon Super Patriots are howling for his head as if he had committed the vilest form of treason imaginable.

Despite the attempts of his staff to get him to pay attention to the negative publicity, Charlie Brushes them aside. He has other things on his mind, such as his relationship with his former wife Casey (Jayne Atkinson). She had filed for divorce, not in anger over any infidelity, but out of despair over his career having placed her in the background of his life. When they meet to talk over affairs it is apparent that each of them are wishing for a better outcome. Both realize it is too late to go back and start over again.

Charlie's schedule calls for him to visit Catatunk, an island twenty miles off the coast of Maine. At the beginning of the film we see that the island's lobster fishermen are fighting a battle against corporate interests that are threatening to destroy the local fishing grounds. The natives fish just part of the year so that the lobsters and fish can replenish themselves, but the big corporation fishes year round, and its indiscriminate method sweeps up everything in its nets, thus threatening the ecosystem.

Before leaving on his trip Charlie makes a defensive statement to a pushy TV reporter about his refusal to join in what he regards as a meaningless flag ritual. This only increases the uproar against him. While he is out of touch on the island the House Ethics Committee will soon agree to call him on the carpet.

Charlie takes along his Chief of Staff Jared Barnes (Ryan Merriman), so a subplot involves Jared, truly a fish out of water when his boss suggests that he tag along with a crew fishing the waters while Charlie is being shown around the island. Unknown to the Congressman Jared has been approached back in Washington by a slimy lobbyist (aren't they all in such films?) Laird Devereaux (George Hamilton) about a deal in the upcoming state convention that would betray his boss.

When Charlie's host is called away on urgent business, local librarian Rae Blanchard (Elizabeth Marvel) continues the tour.

With her he moves beyond the lobstermen's problems to sharing personal matters, including the fact that both of them are divorced. He is especially impressed with the slower paced life on the island and the island's physical beauty that she enjoys so much.

Meanwhile Jared is not having a good time on the boat, piloted by a woman and assisted by Ben (Chris Conroy). The lobbyist, believing that Charlie will be kicked out of Congress because of the uproar over his behavior, promises that he will see that Jared is nominated in place of Charlie at the next party convention. However, Jared will not be able to follow up on this, for soon his phone is plunged into the sea. The sulking aide eventually agrees to help Ben, discovering soon that he enjoys the unusual task of raising and emptying the lobster crates, and even more, appreciating the younger man's company. That night as Charlie draws closer to Rae, Jared develops a relationship with Ben, in whose home he is spending the night.

This duo romance seems very rushed, given that the mainlanders spend just 24 hours on the island! Also the climax at a public meeting where Charlie gives his views on reciting the Pledge and the freedom of choice that we enjoy as Americans, though stirring, seems a bit problematical. I liked the way Charlie eventually handles Jared and his near betrayal and his own future plans for his relationship with Rae—but it all seemed too neatly wrapped up. The writer should have figured out a way for the two mainlanders to have spent more time on Catatank so that the about-face of their lives would have been more believable. The best character transformation films, such as [The Fisher King](#) or [Erin Brocovich](#), take the time to make the transformation (or redemption) acceptable. Nonetheless, after watching so many real Congressmen pompously spewing forth their lies on the evening or cable news, this little film came as a welcome relief. I would like to believe that there are some politicians like Charlie, able to change for the better. I know, this might seem like Linus waiting for the

Great Pumpkin to come, but count me in with Alexander hope, he wrote, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast."

Note: The following statement by the filmmaker contained in an article about him in [Washington Life Magazine](#) is worth reading:

"Prior to the screening, Mrazek, who wrote and directed *The Congressman*, discussed important themes in the political comedy and what he expects audiences will gain from them. He expressed hope that viewers would be prompted to think about what being American means in the current political landscape. 'There's a lot of flag waving and a lot of patriotism about silly things rather than the important issues of what our country is founded on, and that's an idea,' Mrazek said, 'If there is a message, that's it.'

Vision Films

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the June issue of VP.