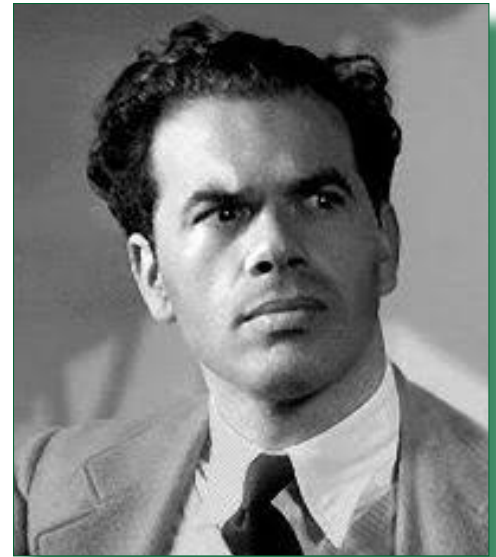


FRANK CAPRA
(1897-1991)

This month's essay is about an Italian-American director famous for movies of the 1930s and 1940s (although he directed films from the 1920s to 1960s). Every Christmas-time for the past several decades, one of his movies (It's a Wonderful Life) has been shown on some television network, and has become a favorite seasonal classic whose TV viewership far outstrips its original viewership in theaters when it was released in 1946. The director we are discussing is Frank Capra who was born in Italy and raised in Los Angeles from the age of five. He was one of the great creative geniuses of Hollywood's "Golden Age." His films usually carry a message about the basic goodness of human nature, showing the value of unselfishness and hard work as average men overcome great injustices. His wholesome, feel-good themes have led his movies to be described as naïve and unrealistic by some critics, but others hail them as major artistic expressions of American values. His own personal life mirrored the course he often depicted in his films, as he rose from poverty, struggled against the odds as an unknown talent in Hollywood, and finally ascended to the pinnacle of success. He was a true personification of the "American Dream" success story.



FRANK CAPRA was born Francesco Rosario Capra on May 18, 1897 in Bisacquino, a village near Palermo, Sicily. He was the youngest of seven children of Salvatore Capra, a fruit grower, and the former Rosaria "Serah" Nicolosi. In 1903, when he was five, he immigrated to the United States with his family, who traveled in one of the steerage compartments of the steamship "Germania," which was the cheapest way to book passage. For Capra, the journey, which took 13 days, remained in his mind for the rest of his life as one of his worst experiences:

You're all together—you have no privacy. You have a cot. Very few people have trunks or anything that takes up space. They have just what they can carry in their hands or in a bag. Nobody takes their clothes off. There's no ventilation, and it stinks like hell. They're all miserable. It's the most degrading place you could ever be. (McBride, p. 29).

He lived with his family in Los Angeles' East Side (now Chinatown) where his older brother Benjamin was already living (an "Italian Ghetto" as he often described the neighborhood of his early years). Here, he attended Casteler Elementary school and later Los Angeles'

Manual Arts High School. He earned money through a number of menial jobs, including selling newspapers, working as a janitor, and playing the banjo in a two-man musical combo at local brothels for a dollar a night. His real passion, though, was pursued during school hours as a participant in the theater program, doing back-stage work, especially lighting.

His family would have preferred that Frank drop out of school and go to work, but he was determined to get an education as part of his plan to fulfill the American Dream. He graduated from high school in 1915 and later that same year entered the Throop College of Technology (later called the California Institute of Technology) to study chemical engineering. It was here that he discovered the poetry and essays of Montaigne through the school's Fine Arts department, developing a taste for language that would soon inspire him to try his hand at writing. Despite the death of his father in 1916, he had the highest grades at Throop and was awarded a \$250 scholarship, in addition to a six-week trip across the United States and Canada.

On September 15, 1918, he graduated from Throop after only three years with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemical engineering, and one month later was commissioned in the United States Army as a second lieutenant, having completed campus ROTC. In the Army, he taught ballistics and mathematics at Fort Winfield Scott in the Presidio of San Francisco



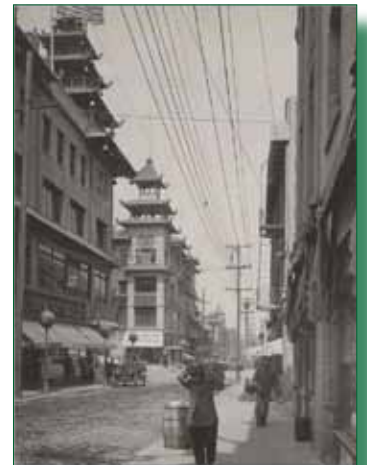
but caught Spanish flu and was medically discharged at the end of the year. He moved back to his brother's flat in LA to recuperate and while he was there answered a newspaper advertisement for extras for John Ford's film *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* (1919). He was given a part as a background laborer, and used this opportunity on set to introduce himself to the film's star, Harry Carey, whom two decades later he would cast in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939).

While living at home with his siblings and mother, Capra realized he was the only family member with a college education, yet he was also the only one who remained chronically unemployed. After a year without work, seeing how his siblings had steady jobs, he felt he was a failure, which led to bouts of depression and abdominal pains, later discovered to have been an undiagnosed burst appendix.

After recovering from his burst appendix at home, Capra moved out and spent the next few years living in flophouses in San Francisco and hopping freight trains, wandering the

Western United States. To support himself, he took odd jobs on farms, as a movie extra, playing professional poker, selling local oil well stocks, and working as a prop man in several silent films. He tried his hand unsuccessfully at writing short stories. This was an unsettled time for the young Capra as he spent further months without work.

During this time—and nearly broke—Capra read a newspaper article about a new movie studio opening in San Francisco. He phoned them saying he had moved from Hollywood, and falsely implied that he had experience in the budding film industry. (His only prior exposure to films was in 1915 while attending Manual Arts High School). The studio's founder, Walter Montague, was nonetheless impressed by Capra and offered him \$75 to direct a one-reel silent film. Capra, with the help of a cameraman, made the film in two days and cast it with amateurs.



After that first serious job in films, Capra began looking for similar openings in the film industry. During this time, he worked as a property man, film cutter, title writer, and assistant director. He directed a 32-minute documentary film entitled *La Visita Dell'Incrociatore Italiano Libya a San Francisco* (*The Visit of the Italian Cruiser "Libya" to San Francisco*). Not only did it document the visit of the Italian naval vessel, but also the reception given to the crew of the ship by San Francisco's L'Italia Virtus Club, now known as the San Francisco Italian Athletic Club.



Subsequently, he received an offer to work with producer Harry Cohn at his new studio (CBC Film Sales Co., which was to evolve into Columbia Pictures) in Los Angeles. In 1924, Capra became a gag writer for Hal Roach's *Our Gang* series. However, after seven weeks and five episodes, he quit when Roach refused to make him the director. He then went to work for slapstick comedy director Mack Sennett as one of six writers for silent movie comedian Harry Langdon (*left*). (According to Capra, it was he who invented Langdon's character, the innocent fool living in a "naughty world.")

When Langdon eventually left Sennett in September, 1925 to make longer, feature-length movies with First National Studios, he took Capra along as his personal writer and director. They made three feature films together during 1926 and 1927, all of them successful with

critics and the public. The films made Langdon a recognized comedian of the caliber of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Capra and Langdon later had a falling out, and Capra was fired. During the following years, Langdon's films went into decline without Capra's assistance. After splitting with Langdon, Capra directed a picture for First National, *For the Love of Mike* (1927). This was a silent comedy about three bickering godfathers, a German, a Jew, and an Irishman, and starred a budding actress, Claudette Colbert (*right*). Capra and Colbert did not get along on set, however, and to make matters worse, production went over-budget resulting in First National's refusal to pay Capra. Ultimately, the movie was considered a failure.



In September, 1927 he was back working as a writer again for Mack Sennett before he received a directing job from Columbia Pictures' president Harry Cohn. His first film there as director was *That Certain Thing*, which met with Cohn's strong approval, and Cohn doubled Capra's salary to \$3,000 per picture. While at Columbia, he made a series of action movies and romantic comedies, such as *The Matinee Idol* (1928), all of which did well at the box-office. With his engineering background, he made a flawless transition to talkies with the high-budget *The Younger Generation* (1929), *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), and *The Miracle Woman* (1931).

In *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), Capra worked with the former stage actress Barbara Stanwyck. She and Capra made a good team, and it was with her that he began to develop his mature directorial style. Knowing that her first scene was usually her best, Capra started blocking out scenes in advance. The crew also had to boost its level of craftsmanship and spontaneity as a result.



After *Ladies of Leisure*, Capra was assigned to direct *Platinum Blond* (1931) starring Jean Harlow and Loretta Young. The film's character "Stew Smith" provided the type for what would become the prototypical "Capra hero." Harry Cohn (*at left with Capra, right*) gradually placed more and more material under Capra's control, including the passed-over scripts and actors from some of the more major production companies, such as Warner Brothers and MGM.

His films soon established Capra as a “bankable” director known throughout the industry, and Cohn raised Capra’s salary to \$25,000 per year. Capra directed a film for MGM during this period, but soon realized he had more freedom at Columbia, where Cohn also put Capra’s name above the title of his films, which was a “first” for the movie industry.

Starting in 1932, with *American Madness*, starring Walter Huston, Capra shifted from his pattern of making movies dealing with “escapist” plot-lines to creating films based more in reality, reflecting the social conditions of the day. The film introduced Capra’s favorite theme, the struggle of the ordinary man against a rigid, faceless bureaucracy. The next decade saw Capra bring this theme to perfection in a string of movie classics. (This shift to reality-based plots pre-dated the similar move of the Italian directors of the Neorealist movement in Italian cinema that followed World War II).

It was also with *American Madness* that he made a bold move against the cinematic “grammar” of his day. Columbia had gradually given him more freedom, and he used this to experiment with quickening the pace of his movies by cutting the entrances and exits of actors, and letting actions jump from scene to scene without slow dissolves—all signs of a maturing, experienced director. Another radical innovation which he introduced around this time was the deliberate overlapping of dialogue, instead of the much slower paced theatrical convention of performers waiting for their cues from the previous speaker. All of these innovations resulted in creating a sense of urgency which better held the attention of the audience. Except for “mood pieces,” Capra began to use these techniques on all his future films and was heralded by directors for the “naturalness” of his directing.



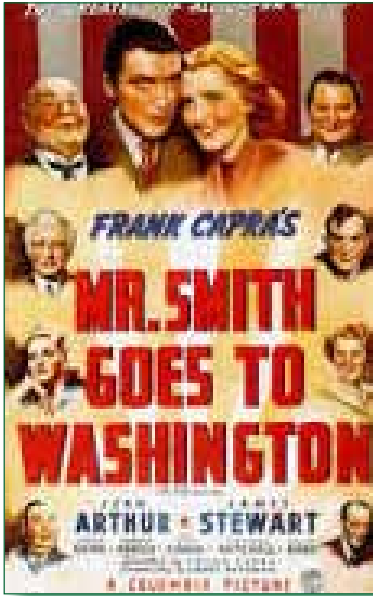
Capra’s “golden period” began with *It Happened One Night* (1934). This screen combination of crazy comedy and concern for social problems in the Great Depression was Capra’s first Oscar success, becoming the first motion picture to win an Academy Award in the five major categories: Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. The making of this enduring romantic comedy about a runaway heiress (Claudette Colbert) and the brash newspaper reporter (Clark Gable) who tracks her down and falls for her became familiar Hollywood lore. (Gable, who was one of MGM’s biggest contract stars, was sent by the studio to work on Columbia’s bargain-basement production as punishment because he wanted more money and more freedom in picking his roles. Louis B. Mayer wanted to show him what it was like to work for a low-budget studio, and wanted to stop him from

breaking the grip studios had on their contract players. Colbert was on loan from Paramount. The first day Gable started on the project with Capra, he was drunk and upset about doing a movie with such a bad script. At the start of the project, both he and Colbert complained about it often. However, they were professionals and working with Capra produced a climate that was both enjoyable and productive. The chemistry of their performances was electric and resulted in one of the best-loved movies of the 1930s. In the end, they had the last laugh on their studios. As mentioned above, they both won Academy Awards for their performances in the movie; the only Academy Award each won during their spectacular careers, and when they returned to their respective original studios, they both demanded and received a much higher salary than they had received before *It Happened One Night*).

In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), a smash hit that became one of the three or four films with which he is most closely identified, Capra used a “what if?” plot device to explore themes similar to those in *It Happened One Night*. His belief in the goodness of the common man, contrasted with the greed and corruption of businessmen and politicians, came even more to the fore. Mr. Deeds is a “David vs. Goliath” populist fable, in which Gary Cooper starred as Longfellow Deeds, a principled, tuba-playing writer of greeting-card sentiments from a small town in Vermont who inherits his uncle’s \$20 million estate and moves to New York City to administer it. When Deeds decides to give the money to the less fortunate, his sanity is questioned. Jean Arthur plays a hard-boiled reporter who, at first, is suspicious of Deeds’ motives but who falls for him once she realizes his sincerity. Capra’s approach in this film prompted critics to call him “the gee whizz” director, known for advancing the theme of unbridled optimism in overcoming opposition.



From 1935-39, Capra served as president of the Motion Picture Academy. Many have given him credit for saving the institution from demise during his four-year term. There had been a mass boycott of the Academy Awards undertaken by actors, writers, and directors in 1933, as part of the newly formed unions that would become the Screen Actors Guild, Screen Writers Guild, and Screen Directors Guild. He was responsible for smoothing over the strife by deciding that the formerly anti-union Academy should stay out of labor relations. His other significant modifications to the program were: democratizing the nomination process in order to eliminate studio politics; opening the cinematography and interior decoration awards to films made outside the United States; and creating two new acting awards for supporting performances by a man and by a woman. By the time of the 1937 awards ceremony,



the Screen Actors Guild announced that it had no objection to its members attending. To add icing to the cake, that night Capra won his second Oscar for Best Director for *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), which also won the Best Picture award.

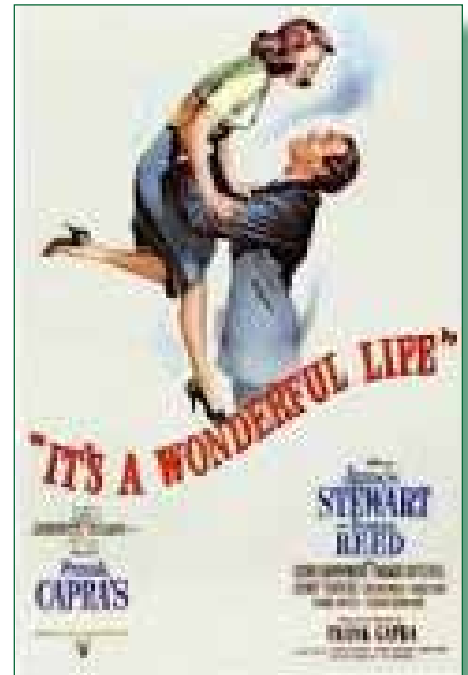
In 1939, Capra was voted president of the Screen Directors Guild and began negotiating with new Academy president Joseph Schneck for the industry to recognize the SDG as the sole collective bargaining agent for directors. Schneck refused and Capra threatened a strike as well as to resign from the Academy personally. Schneck gave in, and one week later, at the Oscar awards ceremony, Capra won his third Best Director title for *You Can't Take it With You* (1938), which starred James Stewart and Jean Arthur (whom Capra called his favorite actress). The movie also won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) was the story of a freshman senator from Montana who uproots pork-barrel corruption in the U.S. Senate at the risk of his own career. Even more than Longfellow Deeds, the aptly named Jefferson Smith (James Stewart) is the epitome of the Capra everyman who refuses to compromise his ethics in the face of enormous pressure from greedy, amoral power brokers—here embodied by Claude Rains' venal Senator Paine, who has sold out to the political machine. Stewart gives one of his most memorable performances, cementing his on-screen persona as the embodiment of integrity and decency, much as Gary Cooper—who was, in fact, Capra's first choice for the role of Jefferson Smith—had done in *Mr. Deeds*. *Mr. Smith* was an enormous popular and critical success, earning 11 Academy Award nominations, including those for Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. However, it won only one Award (for Best Original Story) partly because of the number of major pictures that were nominated that year (10), including *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*.

Capra left Columbia after *Mr. Smith* and continued his examination of the American political system with *Meet John Doe* (1941), which was produced independently by Frank Capra Productions and released through Warner Brothers. Some consider this film to be Capra's most controversial movie. Gary Cooper starred as Long John Willoughby, a former baseball player who is hired by a cynical newspaper reporter (Barbara Stanwyck) to appear in public as the "John Doe" whom she has created in her columns, writing that he vowed to jump off the roof of city hall on Christmas Eve to protest the tyranny of big business. Long John is so convincingly righteous as John Doe that clubs sprout up in support of him, which the newspaper's fascist owner (Edward Arnold) plans to use to gain political power. (Several different endings were

shot for the film, which Capra recalled after its initial release to add what he decided would be its permanent ending). The film was released shortly before America became involved in World War II, and citizens were still in an isolationist mood. According to some historians, the film was made to convey a “deliberate reaffirmation of American values,” though ones that seemed uncertain with respect to the future.

Within four days after the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor, Capra quit his successful directing career in Hollywood, enlisted and received a commission as a Major in the United States Army Signal Corps. His job was to head a special propaganda section on morale and produce a series of films entitled: “Why We Fight.” These were a series of seven documentaries that were intended to increase American support for the war effort. The films, consisting in large part of edited newsreel footage and scenes from Hollywood and foreign war movies, were made for a mere \$400,000. Only *Prelude to War* (1942), which shared an Academy Award for Best Documentary, and *Battle of Russia* (1943) were released theatrically during the war. Capra left the Army with the rank of full Colonel and with a Distinguished Service Medal.



Following the War and back in Hollywood in 1945, Capra joined with directors George Stevens and William Wyler as well as former Columbia executive Sam Briskin to form Liberty Films. Liberty's first release was *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), the now-classic Christmas story about a banker driven to despair who wishes aloud that he had never been born and then gets to see how much poorer the world would have been without him. The source material for the film, “The Greatest Gift”—a short story that was originally sent to friends as a Christmas card by Philip Van Doren Stern and later published in *Good Housekeeping* magazine—was purchased from RKO by Capra. The movie starred James Stewart as banker George Bailey, Donna Reed as his wife, Lionel Barrymore as the conniving Mr. Potter, and Henry Travers as Clarence Oddbody, the angel sent to guide George and show him what it would have been like had he not been born. The movie was released in the Christmas season of 1946.

Despite the fact that the film would become a perennial Christmas holiday favorite, it was not popular at the time of its release. For many contemporary viewers, perhaps, the film's heartwarming conclusion was not enough to balance the movie's dark vision of how cruel life could be. Only after *It's a Wonderful Life* was shown repeatedly on television in the United States beginning in the 1970s did audiences and critics recognize the film as Capra's masterpiece. The movie ultimately marked the end of Capra's period of great creativity.

However, that recognition came too late for Capra and Liberty Films. *It's a Wonderful Life* was the most expensive film of Capra's career and left Liberty about \$500,000 in the red after receipts were tallied. Ironically, the movie that Liberty partner Wyler had made outside the company at the same time, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, became the year's biggest hit. Even so, *It's a Wonderful Life* was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and Capra was nominated for the sixth and final time as Best Director. The movie did not win an Academy Award, but Capra did win the Golden Globe Award for Best Director in 1947 for it.

Capra and his partners sold Liberty Films to Paramount Films. Capra then worked for MGM on his next project, *State of the Union* (1948), based on a Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway satire by Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse. In it Spencer Tracy portrayed a prospective presidential candidate, and Katharine Hepburn played his estranged wife. Although regarded by a number of critics as Capra's last solid work, *State of the Union* struggled to be as stirring as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

The public's mediocre response to *It's a Wonderful Life* and *State of the Union*, released soon after the war ended, showed that Capra's themes were becoming out of step with changes in the film industry and the public mood. Although his ideas were popular with depression-era and pre-war audiences, they became less relevant to a prospering post-war America.



After a relatively poor record over the following three years, including two Bing Crosby movies—*Riding High* (1950) and *Here Comes the Groom* (1951)—his films lacked the sting and relevance of his earlier works. Capra, thus, took an eight-year hiatus from feature films. During this time, he created a memorable series of television semi-comic science documentaries for AT&T that became required viewing for school children in the 1960's. These included *Our Mr. Sun* (1956), *Hemo the Magnificent* (1957), *The Strange Case of the Cosmic Rays* (1957), and *The Unchained Goddess* (1958).

Capra's final two theatrical films were *A Hole in the Head* (1959), in which Frank Sinatra starred as an hotelier whose irresponsibility nearly costs him custody of his son, and co-starred Edward G. Robinson. This was Capra's first feature movie in color. His final theatrical movie *Pocketful of Miracles* (1961) starring Bette Davis and Glenn Ford, was a musical remake of his 1933 movie *Lady for a Day*; it failed to earn back its cost. The movie received three Academy Award nominations for Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Peter Falk), Best Costume Design, and Best Original Song. Capra chose to retire after *Pocketful of Miracles* rather than adapt to the new post-studio-system of filmmaking.

Capra's final film, *Rendezvous in Space* (1964), was an industrial film made for the Martin Marietta Company and shown at the 1964 New York World's Fair. It was exhibited at the New York Hall of Science after the Fair ended.

PERSONAL LIFE

Capra married twice, first to Helen Howell in November, 1923, but, in 1927, when she had an ectopic pregnancy terminated on medical advice, the marriage began to deteriorate. Capra immersed himself in his work and his wife began to drink heavily. The couple divorced in 1928.



His second marriage, in 1932, was to Lucille Reyburn, whom he met on a blind date. She was a strong woman with whom he had a close, loving relationship until her death in 1984. They had a daughter and three sons, one of whom died in infancy. Frank Capra, Jr., one of the sons, became a prominent film producer, and was president of EUE Screen Gems Studios in Wilmington, North Carolina, until his death in 2007.

Capra's grandsons, brothers Frank Capra III and Jonathan Capra, have both worked as assistant directors—Frank III worked on the 1995 film *The American President*, which referred to Frank Capra in the film's dialogue.

In 1985, at 88, Capra suffered one of a series of strokes. He died in La Quinta, California, of a heart attack in his sleep in 1991 at the age of 94. He was interred at Coachella Valley Public Cemetery in Coachella, California.

He left part of his 1,100-acre ranch in Fallbrook, California, to Caltech, his alma mater, as a retreat center. His personal papers and some film-related materials are contained in the Wesleyan University Cinema Archives, which allows scholars and media experts full access.

IMPORTANCE

Capra's deep belief in the importance of individual expression became as much a hallmark of the characters in his films as it was of his own filmmaking creed. From the mid-1930s through the mid-1940s, i.e. through the Great Depression and World War II, his films were usually similar in their humorous presentation of a naive, idealistic, and courageous hero. They projected an essential optimism as the underdog heroes triumphed over shrewd but selfish individuals in a world often beset by darkness and despair.

Some critics have denigrated Capra's films from this period (1934-46) as reflecting a utopianism that was unimaginably far from reality. Others have countered that Capra neither denied that cynics were ubiquitous nor that political power was generally in the hands of the few, but that he instead sought to depict a more just world that could result from the strong-willed exertion of moral force. Many film historians have noted that Capra's populist championing of individual freedom was accompanied by a profound distrust of mass society and mass politics, yet the triumph of the "little people" (often working collectively) in his films defies easy or uniform identification with any political ideology. Much clearer is Capra's celebration of the strength of the American character, though it can be seen as both intensely patriotic and chauvinistic in its embrace of American exceptionalism. Coming as they did in the throes of the Great Depression, Capra's idealistic, best-known works combined patriotism, idealism, and sentimentality. These films were frequently called "Capra-corn" (even by the filmmaker himself), but with the passage of time, they have become more positively described by movie critics and aficionados as "Capraesque."

It is easy to say that Capra's optimism was naive and his characters gullible, but at a time when the Great Depression and World War II made reality grim enough, his films provided belief and relief for a short period of time in the movie theater.

His vision of America is essentially a simplistic one which is still extremely appealing to the basic emotions of the audience and Capra's films have remained popular, particularly with young people who gravitate toward Capra's idealistic, non-materialistic heroes. It is this simplicity, combined with an intimate knowledge and mastery of the film-making process which has contributed to his enduring popularity. He is undoubtedly one of the Greats.

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:
Barson, Michael. "Frank Capra, American Film Director." Encyclopedia Britannica website; Capra, Frank. Frank Capra, The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971; Hollywood's Golden Age website; McBride, Joseph. Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success. New York: Touchstone Books, 1992; Wikipedia; World Encyclopedia website.*

*Receiving the Distinguished Service Medal
from General George C. Marshall, 1945.*

