

Gregory Peck

A man of morals

Gregory Peck was one of Hollywood's most outspoken liberals. Steve O'Brien remembers an actor whose passionately held beliefs even led to him being added to President Richard Nixon's list of political enemies...

There were, to those who knew him, few differences between the real Gregory Peck and his best-known role of Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). Seen as the embodiment of compassionate liberalism, Harper Lee's Alabama-based lawyer was a character that seemed made to order for the famously left-leaning actor. As Lee herself once said, 'Atticus Finch gave Gregory Peck an opportunity to play himself.'

Modern Hollywood is, as we know, not short of progressives, but in Tinseltown's Golden Age, the industry was made of a more even mix of liberals and conservatives. For every Republican-voting John Wayne or James Stewart, there was a Democrat-ticking Kirk Douglas or Henry Fonda. But while most actors of that era left their politics in the polling booth, some, like Peck, were devotedly ideological and fearless about sharing their views in public.

In fact, Peck's activism and outspokenness on causes close to his heart was so great that in the 1970 election for Governor of California, the actor was urged by some within the Democratic Party to stand against the incumbent, Republican Ronald Reagan. ➤



An only child, Peck was raised by his grandmother after his parents divorced



Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* was an expression of Peck's own liberal beliefs

Peck, however, refused, stating, 'I never gave a thought to running. Not even in my heart of hearts do I have an ambition to do that.'

Peck's candour on political issues made him especially uncommon in the Fifties and Sixties. With US senator Joseph McCarthy spearheading a witch hunt of alleged communists within the film industry, many moviemakers and actors were either blacklisted or forced to keep their sympathies secret. Some named names in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), while others refused to co-operate. But Peck was never a communist, his beliefs having much more in common with mainstream Democrat Party principles, more Franklin D Roosevelt than Vladimir Lenin. 'I am not now and never have been associated with any communist organisation or supporters of communism,' the actor told one committee hearing, adding, 'I am not a communist, never was a communist, and have no sympathy with communist activities.'

Though he was no Bolshevik, Peck found McCarthy's persecution of communists as un-American as the right-wing senator believed these radicals to be. 'I hold no brief for communists,' Peck wrote to a fan once, as detailed in Lynn Haney's book *Gregory Peck: A Charmed Life*, 'but I believe in and will defend their right to act independently within the law.'

ROLES WITH A MESSAGE

While many left-wing actors and filmmakers kept their politics separate from their art, Gregory Peck's ideology often informed his career choices. In 1947, he went against his agent's advice to star in *Gentleman's Agreement*, a film that shone a spotlight on racial bigotry. Based on Laura Z Hobson's novel, it told the story of a journalist who pretends to be Jewish to research an exposé on antisemitism in New York City. Many years later,

Peck made *On the Beach* (1959) with Ava Gardner because he was against nuclear weapons



when asked what the movie meant to him, the actor replied, 'To me, *Gentleman's Agreement* was a picture about Americanism.'

The film was a sensation. Despite Peck's agent warning that it would destroy his career, it became one of 20th Century Fox's highest-grossing movies, going on to win three Academy Awards (for Best Picture, Best Director and Best Supporting Actress). In his seminal book *Antisemitism in America*, historian Leonard Dinnerstein wrote of the impact that *Gentleman's Agreement* had in 'unmask[ing] those who tried to hide their bigotry under the mask of gentility and conformity.'

The director of *Gentleman's Agreement* was Elia Kazan, one of Hollywood's most outwardly left-wing filmmakers. Just a few years later, his testimony to the HUAC and decision to name names (he'd been a member of the US Communist Party in his mid-20s) led to many in Hollywood turning their backs on him. Peck, however, wasn't one of them, refusing to publicly exorcise the director. Writes Lynn Haney, 'He could separate the director's character from his enormous contributions to the theatre and the movies.'

Peck's firmly held beliefs didn't just affect which movies he said yes to, but also the ones he wanted nothing to do with. Offered the lead



Peck insisted Hepburn's name went above his in the *Roman Holiday* credits

in Fox's *Lydia Bailey* (1952), Peck turned it down, wary of having his name associated with a story he felt demonised the Haitian people (the US had occupied the country from 1915-34). The actor had dreams – sadly unrealised – of making a film about the Haitian Revolution, where, in the late 1700s, an uprising of African slaves led to the first free black republic in the Americas. He spoke admiringly of how those revolutionaries, 'carried on democratic ideals... against all the efforts of the French to retake the island and continue the exploitation of the people, their former slaves.'



Arriving in London in 1950 with wife Greta and their children, Jonathan, Stephen and baby Carey

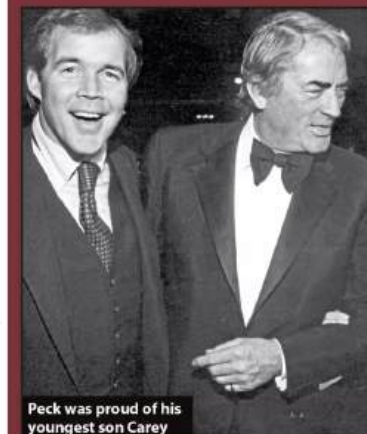
A PERFECT FIT

Over the coming decade Peck would star in many successful features – *Roman Holiday* (1953), *Moby Dick* (1956) and *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), among them – but the film that would come to define his career was, of course, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Not that Peck was first choice for the role of Atticus Finch – it had first been offered to James Stewart, who turned it down, wary of the book's controversial themes, telling as it did the story of a white, Southern lawyer who defends a black man on a rape charge. However much the novel enraged conservatives at the time, it became one of Sixties most talked about books, going on to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. To movie producer Alan J Pakula it was immediately apparent why Peck was such a perfect fit for the role, later saying that, 'the man and the character he played were not unlike.' Peck was even quoted on the back cover of the book's 1962 reissue, saying, 'The Southern town ➤

Like father, like son

Though Gregory Peck ruled himself out of running for public office, he did encourage one of his sons, Carey Peck, in his political ambitions. Peck Jr ran for Congress against the Republican Bob Dornan – a former actor and the nephew of Wizard of Oz star Jack Haley – twice, in 1978 and 1980. The contests were dubbed Star Wars, on account of the candidates' fame, but any thought that because of their superficial similarities, the election would be a friendly one were far from the mark. Dornan claimed that his opponent accepted an illegal campaign contribution, an accusation Peck strenuously denied. Dornan was also alleged to have called Peck a 'sick, pompous little ass', later clarifying to a reporter: 'I never said that. Why would I call him sick? He's obviously a tall, healthy guy. What I said is that he is a sycophant and a pompous little ass.'

Carey Peck lost both times. Dornan went on to declare himself a candidate for the US Presidency in 1996 and later became a right-wing talk show host. Peck, meanwhile, according to his father's official website, became a Grant Administrator for the Los Angeles Unified School District, an organisation he still works for today.



Peck was proud of his youngest son Carey

DID YOU KNOW?

From 1967-70 Peck served as President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He made the decision to postpone the 1968 Oscar ceremony after Martin Luther King's assassination.

of Maycomb, Alabama, reminds me of the California town I grew up in. The characters of the novel are like people I knew as a boy. I think perhaps the great appeal of the novel is that it reminds readers everywhere of a person or a town they have known. It is to me a universal story – moving, passionate and told with great humour and tenderness.'

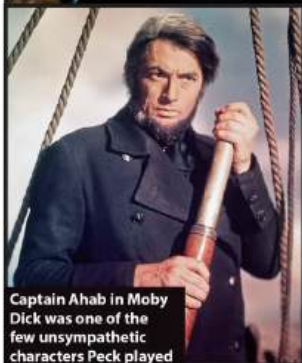
Liberal America found a new hero in Atticus Finch. The character's line that, 'in our courts all men are created equal', was quoted extensively by civil rights leaders at the time and, in many people's eyes, those scenes in the movie cemented the idea of Gregory Peck as a politician in waiting. But while Ronald Reagan was already making strides in the Republican Party, Peck claimed to have no interest in public office, telling the press, 'I have had enough of the limelight to last a lifetime. I am not tempted by the idea of political power.'

Instead, Peck used his fame to speak out on issues he cared passionately about. In 1964 he narrated a documentary about the recently assassinated Democratic President John F Kennedy and, in 1972, produced a film *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, about a group of activists who were jailed after burning draft notices in protest of the Vietnam War.

Though Peck was opposed to the conflict, he was hesitant about voicing his beliefs too



Peck felt *The Guns of Navarone* had an anti-war message



Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* was one of the few unsympathetic characters Peck played

publicly. Part of that was because his son Stephen was serving in south-east Asia, and also because of the actor's friendship with then-President Lyndon B Johnson. Peck may not have been aligned with LBJ's policy on Vietnam, but America's Commander-in-Chief had full-throated support from

him on a range of other issues, among them civil rights, social security, education and gun control. 'Greg and Johnson seemed like an odd match,' Lynn Haney wrote in her biography of Peck, 'but they appreciated each other. To the backwoods President, Greg represented elegance and dignity. LBJ desperately needed to be associated with both.'

KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE...

Peck's association with Johnson (who in 1969 presented the actor with the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his humanitarian and political work), and his links with that administration meant he was viewed with suspicion by LBJ's

replacement, Richard Nixon. The famously paranoid Republican placed Peck on a so-called 'enemies list', along with other supposed subversives including Jane Fonda and Paul Newman.

It's often said people become more conservative as they grow older, but that was never the case with Gregory Peck. He remained fiercely proud of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and his role as Atticus Finch, once stating, 'I'm extremely lucky to have a picture like that in my background because it's not forgotten.'

Even in his 60s and 70s, Peck continued to campaign vigorously, including in 1978 when he travelled to Alabama, the setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in support of Senate nominee Donald W Stewart. Even as late as 1999 the actor was advocating for more gun control, saying in the documentary *A Conversation with Gregory Peck*, 'Is it the culture or the guns that led to the massacre at Columbine High School? And it is of course both.'

What is wrong with keeping guns out of the hands of the wrong people?'

Gregory Peck died in 2003 at the age of 87. That same year, Atticus Finch was named the greatest movie hero of the past 100 years by the American Film Institute and, while other actors have essayed Harper Lee's inspirational lawyer, it's Peck's Oscar-winning portrayal that remains definitive.

'I'm glad it's still alive,' Peck told the writer Judy Sloane in 1994 about the legacy of that big-screen classic. 'It seems to have a life, and it all goes back to Harper and the way she grew up with her father's values. We all feel lucky that we were in it, and that it was recognised and that it still affects people. That doesn't happen often.'



I know the face...

UNA MERKEL



Born: 10 December, 1903, Covington, Kentucky

Died: 2 January, 1986, Los Angeles, California

Screen debut: *Love's Old Sweet Song* (1923)

Screen credits: 115

Best known for: She graced Broadway in the Twenties before transitioning to Hollywood in 1930. Known for her 'Kewpie-doll' looks, southern accent, and witty delivery, she became a popular supporting actress. Memorable roles include *42nd Street* (1933) and *Destry Rides Again* (1939), where she engaged in a famous catfight with Marlene Dietrich. Merkel also played Sam Spade's secretary in *The Maltese Falcon* (1931). While her film career waned in the Forties, she won a Tony Award in 1956 for *The Ponder Heart* and received an Oscar nomination for *Summer and Smoke* (1961). Her final film appearance was in Elvis Presley's *Spinout* (1966).

Hollywood and politics

Gregory Peck wasn't, of course, the only outspoken liberal in the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies. Several other left-wing actors made President Richard Nixon's famed 'enemies list', including Paul Newman, Burt Lancaster, Tony Randall and Jane Fonda. But while none of the film people on Nixon's list ever formally moved into politics, there have been several actors over the years who have tried their hand at

elected office, in the name of the Democrat Party.

The Beverly Hillbillies' Nancy Kulp was a candidate in the 1984 House of Representatives elections in Pennsylvania, while *The Waltons*' Ralph Waite ran three times for the House.

Though Hollywood is seen as culturally Democrat, Republicans have been more successful at the ballot box, with the party boasting such luminaries as Ronald

Reagan (President), Clint Eastwood (Mayor of Carmel-by-the-Sea) and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Governor of California), as well as *Psycho*'s John Gavin (appointed Ambassador to Mexico by Reagan) and Shirley Temple, the first female US Chief of Protocol under President Gerald Ford.



Paul Newman on the campaign trail