

LEWIS LAPHAM'S
THE AMERICAN
RULING CLASS



America rules the world! But who rules America?



Featuring Robert Altman, Walter Cronkite, Kurt Vonnegut and many more!

THE PRESS & THE PUBLIC PROJECT, INC. PRESENTS THE AMERICAN RULING CLASS INTRODUCED BY LEWIS LAPHAM EDITED BY LEAH O'DONNELL AND JOHN KIRBY DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MARK BENJAMIN ORIGINAL SCORE OASIM NAOVI
MUSICAL NUMBERS LUCAS JOHNSON-YAHRAUS ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS GREEN RICK LOPEZ SOUND BY DAVID HOGS CHRISTOF GEBERT EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS STANLEY BUCHTHAL CAROLINE CAMOUGIS
NICK FRASER FOR THE BBC JULIE GOLDMAN KRYSANNE KATSOOLIS AND CAROLINE STEVENS FOR CACTUS THREE CHRIS HILTON PAULA SILVER WRITTEN BY LEWIS LAPHAM PRODUCED BY LIBBY HANDROS DIRECTED BY JOHN KIRBY
FILM BY KODAK COLOR BY DuArt PUBLIC RELATIONS BY GOLDSTEIN COMMUNICATIONS

The American Ruling Class, the world's first "dramatic documentary musical," explores our country's most taboo topic: class, power, and privilege in our nominally democratic republic. This feature-length satire stars Lewis Lapham, the renowned essayist and author, and a heavyweight ensemble cast that includes former cabinet secretaries, corporate mandarins, media magnates,

and at least one journalist working as a waitress. The film follows Lapham and two recent (fictional) Yale graduates while they make the rounds of Pentagon briefings, the World Economic Forum, philanthropic foundations, law firms, corporations, banks, and New York society dinners as they attempt to answer the question, **"Who rules America?"**

A CLASSIC COMING-OF-AGE TALE AND AN ILLUMINATING EXPLORATION OF POWER IN AMERICA



The narrative portion of the film, interwoven throughout, tells the story of two representative graduates, “one rich and one poor,” as they seek direction in their lives.

Does America have a ruling class? If so, of what is it made, and how does it coexist with our democracy? How does one join it? Should one even want to?

The real-life luminaries become characters in a story about power and its responsibilities, and by the film’s end, the young men must decide:



Do they wish to rule the world ... or save it?

AN ALL-STAR ENSEMBLE CAST



Robert B. Altman
James A. Baker III
Bill Bradley
Harold Brown



Hodding Carter III
William T. Coleman, Jr.



Walter Cronkite
Barbara Ehrenreich



Martin Garbus
Vartan Gregorian
Mike Medavoy
Joseph S. Nye, Jr.



Samuel Peabody
Peter G. Peterson
Pete Seeger
Lawrence H. Summers
Arthur O. Sulzberger, Jr.
William Howard Taft IV
Kurt Vonnegut





THE PRODUCTION TEAM

A celebrated American author and an award-winning production company.

As “the editor of a magazine with offices in New York,” Lewis Lapham (1935 - 2024) won a multitude of National Magazine Awards and was inducted into the American Society of Magazine Editors’ Hall of Fame. One of the most respected writers of his day, Lapham was the author of numerous books. *The New York Times* likened him to H.L. Mencken; *Vanity Fair* suggested he was this era’s Mark Twain.

The film is a production of The Press and the Public Project, Inc., a leading not-for-profit production company with over twenty years of experience producing award-winning films for both commercial and public television.

A consortium of international broadcasters led by the BBC, along with private investors, have provided funding for the film, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival.



PRODUCER



LIBBY HANDROS is an award-winning producer and investigative journalist who has developed and produced more than a hundred hours of prime-time programming on a wide array of subjects: public policy, news, sports, history, international affairs, education, and the movies. She began

her career in television journalism at WNEW-TV in New York City and WCVB-TV in Boston. Part of the team that produced PBS's groundbreaking *Inside Story* — the first regularly scheduled examination of the American press ever to appear on television — she went on to coproduce a variety of documentaries: *The Lindbergh Baby Kidnapping*, for The History Channel; *The Baseball Hall of Fame Scrapbook* and *Hardball*, for ESPN; *David Durk: Portrait of a Whistle-Blower*, for Fox; *The Money Go-Round*, for PBS; and *Trump: What's the Deal?*

(Cont.)

The American Ruling Class was her first collaboration with creative partner John Kirby, under the auspices of their production company, The Press and the Public Project. Her second film with Kirby, *Cape Spin: An American Power Struggle*, was released theatrically and was dubbed “rollicking” by *The Phoenix* and “sober, light-hearted, even wacky” by the *Associated Press*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Handros and Kirby cocreated *spectives on the Pandemic*, a series of filmed interviews with prominent voices in medicine, journalism, and activism, discussing both the medical and sociopolitical dimensions of the outbreak.

Timed for the 25th anniversary of 9/11, the pair’s most recent coproduction — *The Responders: Breaking the Silence* — tells the story of September 11th, 2001, from the uncensored viewpoint of first responders who risked their lives that day and have since responded to the call to speak the truth, whatever the cost.

The pair is also currently collaborating on *Four Died Trying*, a long-form documentary film franchise. Years in the making, it examines the lives and assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy — and the unseen power structures they defied.

DIRECTOR

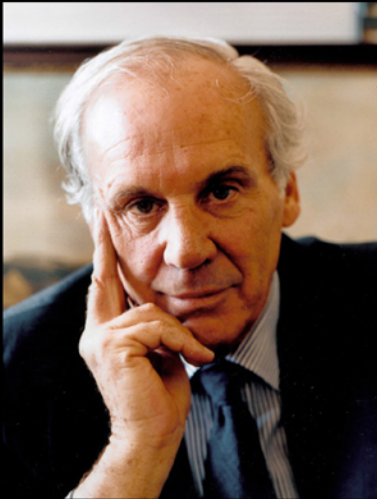


JOHN KIRBY

In addition to his debut feature *The American Ruling Class*, John has directed, edited, and consulted on dozens of documentaries and nonfiction series. He codirected *Cape Spin! An American Power Struggle*. His editorial credits include the Emmy-winning *Thug Life in D.C.* and the cult classic *Gladiator Days: Anatomy of a Prison Murder*, both for HBO.

With producer Libby Handros, John has been directing *Four Died Trying*, a long-form documentary film cycle. Years in the making, it examines the lives and assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy — and the unseen power structures they defied.

A STATEMENT FROM LEWIS LAPHAM



“Subsequent to the events of September 11th, 2001, I don’t know of any topic as relevant to the predicament in which the country now finds itself than the composition of the American leadership class. The headlines every morning speak to the rising surge of violence in the world, much of the anger directed at the United States, and on what ethical ground do we defend our American freedom and prosperity?

Nobody disputes the fact of our military predominance, but with what moral and intellectual force do we confront the hostility of people who don’t see much of a difference between the prospect of death by starvation, gunfire, or disease?

“The questions bear on the character of the American elites, and the film examines the ways in which we establish those elites. What do we expect our leaders to know? What values do we require them to hold? Of whom does the American leadership class consist, where does it find its philosophy, and how does it differ from its Asian and European counterparts? Define the American directorate as the few hundred thousand people who manage the government, coin the money, write the laws, administer the schools, own and operate the news media, and how do we know them when we see them? From whence do they come, and to whom or to what do they owe their positions of authority?

(Cont.)



“The documentary proceeds from the premise that no society can exist without some form of social hierarchy. The Roman Empire rested on a class system; so did medieval France and Victorian England. So does the United States — in 2005 as in 1805 and 1905. But being American, and therefore sworn at birth to the doctrine of egalitarianism, we don’t like to concede the existence of our own class system.

“We meet it every day in the street, but we pretend it isn’t there. The word ‘class’ comes armed with so much ambivalence and so many contradictions that its meaning shifts with the social setting and the tone of voice, with the height of the ceiling, the names of the other people on the guest list, the view (or lack thereof) of the mountains or the sea. Our political rhetoric dwells on what must be done for the democratic many; the vocabulary of our commercial advertising dwells on what can be made available to the privileged few. Once having proclaimed our loyalty to the idea that all men are created equal, we do everything possible to prove ourselves unequal.

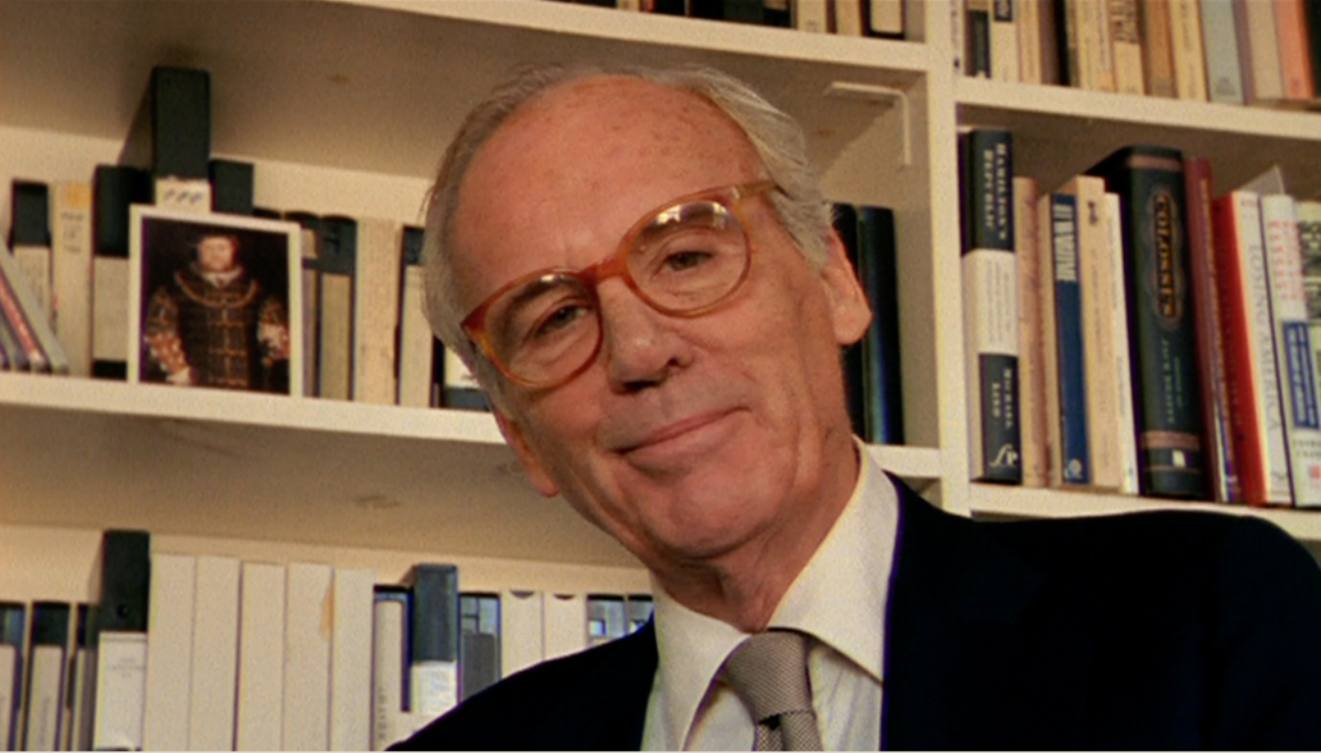
(Cont.)

“Absent a landed aristocracy that bestows entitlements at birth, a nominally democratic society must assemble its ruling elites from whatever egalitarian materials come most meritocratically to hand. Being an inventive and productive people, we manufacture our leaders in the same way that we build expensive automobiles and exclusive resort

film about the composition of computer circuits.

“During the years since the declaration of our war on terrorism, a good many people not only in the United States but everywhere else in the world have raised questions about the character and motives of the American Colossus. Do we hope to retain the republic that Benjamin Franklin knew would be hard to keep, or do we wish to invest ourselves with the mantle of an empire? How high a price do we set on the head of freedom? If we delete another few paragraphs from the Bill of Rights, what do we ask of the government in return for our silence in court? If we define our American democracy as a *res publica*, of what does the *res publica* consist?

(Cont.)



“Given the magnitude of the American presence in the world, the questions seem to me timely. They’re likely to shape the course of events, both at home and abroad, during the first quarter of the new century — and from whom else do we expect answers if not from the American leadership class?”



CREDITS

DIRECTOR.....John Kirby

PRODUCER.....Libby Handros

SCREENWRITER.....Lewis Lapham

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY.....Mark Benjamin

EDITORS.....John Kirby & Leah O'Donnell

MUSIC.....Qasim Naqvi & Lucas Johnson-Yahraus

PRINCIPAL CAST

Lewis Lapham, Paul Cantagallo,
and Caton Burwell

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

Stanley Buchthal, Caroline Camougis, Paula Silver

Nick Fraser for the BBC

Julie Goldman, Krysanne Katsoolis, Caroline Stevens
for Cactus Three

QUOTES FROM THE FILM

“All ruling classes are based on merit ... the problem is, how do you define ‘merit?’” —LEWIS LAPHAM

“Everybody has the ability to be brilliant or stupid. Now if those are your two choices, why would you elect being stupid?” —WILLIAM T. COLEMAN, JR.

“There are no movies anymore, there is only content — content and distribution. Because if you are a great writer, you’ll create a brand! In a word, sales. ‘And who do we do it for, Mike?’ Six multinational, hyper-diversified, interlocking, globe-straddling oligopolies. Today six; tomorrow three, then two, then one.” —MIKE MEDAVOY

“Recognize that the phrase ‘national interest’ is a synonym for ‘self-interest,’ and you will find no moral obstacle that cannot be removed from the highway of ambition.” —LEWIS LAPHAM

“My lord... Of course, there’s a ruling class, and it’s based on money. It’s a very simple problem: You can buy a jet plane of your own, or you can buy a president.” —KURT VONNEGUT

“It’s like this: Imagine a big seesaw and one end is on the ground because it’s got a basket half-full of rocks in it; the other end is up in the air because it’s got a basket one-quarter-full of sand. And some of us got teaspoons, and we’re trying to fill it, and of course, most people are kind of scoffing at us. They say, ‘Don’t you see it’s leaking, just as quick as you’re puttin’ it in? People like you have been trying for centuries, but it’s never going to change.’ And we say, ‘You might be right, but we think we’re getting more people with teaspoons all the time, and one of these days that whole seesaw is going to go zooop!’ And people say, ‘Gee, how did it happen so suddenly?’ Us and all our little teaspoons over the centuries. Who knows...” —PETE SEEGER

“Remember Voltaire: ‘The comfort of the rich depends upon an abundance of the poor.’ It’s a law of economics as old as supply and demand.”
—LEWIS LAPHAM

“The ruling class is the rich, who really command our industry, our commerce, and our finance. And those people are so able to manipulate our democracy, that they really control the democracy, I feel.”

—WALTER CRONKITE

“Philanthropy— don’t tell me about philanthropy, Jack. The real philanthropists in our society are the people who work for less than they can actually live on. Because they are giving of their time and their energy and their talents, all the time, so that people like you can be dressed well and fed cheaply and so on. They are giving to you.” —BARBARA

EHRENREICH

PRESS

*“The American Ruling Class feels like a documentary version of *The Wizard of Oz*, as director John Kirby and Lapham attempt to illuminate the heart of darkness inside the American political-economic machine. What they find ain’t pretty.”* —MATTHEW HAYS, *MONTREAL MIRROR*

“A call to arms for everyone to think about how their actions will affect the future in which we live.” —SARAH HUGHES, *THE LONDON OBSERVER*

“It plays with form, but is populist in outreach, transcending documentary expectations with wit, style, and political savvy.” —PETER WINTONICK, PRODUCER/DIRECTOR, *MANUFACTURING CONSENT: NOAM CHOMSKY AND THE MEDIA*

“The American Ruling Class KO’d me, telling ‘ordinary’ citizens who it is — or what means are used — to run our ‘democratic’ society. The mentor of two of the ‘heirs’ just out of Yale University was Lewis Lapham, the most hip and perceptive editor of all our monthlies. It is an astonishing film — but, more important, tells us who really runs things.” —STUDS TERKEL

*“[An] entertaining documentary, *The American Ruling Class* offers a guided safari through the tribal haunts of the power elite.”* —JAMES WOLCOTT, *VANITY FAIR*

“[A] satirical tour thru the corridors of power with Lewis Lapham... The film takes on our political and financial elites, the top of America’s food chain, but it’s all for a purpose: to remind us of those who are struggling just to make ends meet.” —**BILL MOYERS**

“Lapham ... with his easy charm and Luciferian tendency to pop up out of nowhere, injects every scene he’s in with sly humor.”
—**DARRELL HARTMAN, YALE ALUMNI MAGAZINE**

“As lethally on-target as a red-tailed hawk’s deadly talons. Quirky, amusing, original, educational, and illuminating, it’s like watching a Michael Moore documentary set to show tunes.” —**FEMINIST REVIEW**

“That unusual animal, the political documentary, with high-wattage star power.” —**JOHN ANDERSON, VARIETY**

“I know we’re not supposed to have favorites, but I’ve seen this movie twice and I love it.” —**JANE ROSENTHAL, COFOUNDER, TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL**

“A cleverly contemporary social analysis... unforgettably revealing interviews.” —**NEW YORK PRESS**

“A brilliant documentary/comedy, part Monty Python, part Michael Moore.” —**JOSEPH A. SOARES, PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY, WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY**

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THE
CRITERION
CHANNEL

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