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GLOBAL VIEW

Sully and Anti-Sullies

A movie celebrates old-fashioned virtues in a political season devoid of them.



Captain Chesley Sullenberger at the premiere of 'Sully,' Sept. 6. PHOTO: REUTERS

By Bret Stephens

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The other night I took my 11-year-old son to see “Sully,” Clint Eastwood’s engrossing new film about Chesley Sullenberger, the US Airways pilot who safely landed his stricken aircraft on the Hudson River on a frigid day in January 2009. After the movie, over burgers, we talked about **the difference between heroism and fame.**

“Famous people,” my son ventured, “depend on what other people think of them to be who they are. Sully just cared about whether he did everything right.”

On Monday night, after this column goes to press, two famous if decidedly unheroic people will debate who better deserves to be president, and nearly the only thing they have in common is their disdain for doing “everything right.” Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton are our anti-Sullies—characters without character, famous for being famous, the type of adults we don’t want our children to become. How they got to where they are is one question. **Another is how we raise more Sullies.**

The answer the movie gives is: It’s not easy. In one scene, Sullenberger and his first officer, Jeffrey Skiles, go for an evening walk in Manhattan days after the water landing. They are the toast of the town, making the rounds of TV talk shows even as their days are otherwise spent addressing questions from crash investigators and sleeping at a Courtyard Marriott. “I guess I’m having trouble separating reality from whatever this is,” the captain says to his co-pilot.

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“Whatever this is” is the representational side of American culture, not just media or celebrity culture, but what might be called posture culture—the incessant pretending-to-be that is such a part of modern life, and which digital and social media do so much to amplify. Posture culture is Mr. Trump discussing his wealth, brains and everything else that allegedly makes him big; it’s Hillary Clinton falsely claiming that as first lady

she braved sniper fire while landing in Bosnia.

But posture culture creeps into the everyday life of normal people. In another telling scene, right before the fateful flight, Skiles gently ribs Sullenberger for the website of his private

business as an airline-safety consultant. The website makes Sully's one-man company seem larger than it is, and he's mortified to be called out for this trivial act of puffery.

The exchange captures something essential about Sullenberger's character: He isn't quite immune to the posture culture, but neither is he defined by it. His character is anchored by a sense of honor and the virtues that go with it: honesty, accountability, selflessness, curiosity, courage, self-possession, modesty. When his plane lands on the Hudson, he's the last man out. When the ferries come to the rescue, he's the last man on.

It's one of the achievements of "Sully," the film, that we come to admire the man chiefly for these traits, rather than for his gifts as a pilot. Sullenberger is not a hero because he has great qualities as a pilot; he's a great pilot because he has heroic qualities as a man.

One of those qualities is self-assurance. Another is self-doubt. Surrounded by doubters during the crash investigation, he is sure he did the right thing. Surrounded by flatterers in the media, he wonders if he really got it right. In the inner strain between confidence and skepticism Sullenberger finds his balance, and center, as a man.

Where do these reserves of character come from? The movie only hints at his larger life—Texas roots; Air Force training; a solid marriage—but the real Mr. Sullenberger is more interesting. In 1964, when he was a boy, a woman named Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death near her New York apartment; dozens of neighbors heard her screams but no one helped her. The case became a national sensation.

"I made a pledge to myself, right then at age 13," Mr. Sullenberger recounted to his co-author on his book "Highest Duty," the late Wall Street Journal reporter Jeffrey Zaslow, "that if I was ever in a situation where someone such as Kitty Genovese needed my help, I would choose to act. No one in danger would be abandoned."

Various words describe this attitude. Chivalry. Gallantry. Duty. Manliness. All of them are old-fashioned. All of them are out of step with prevailing ideological certitudes that are supposed to make us firm believers in gender-neutral bathrooms and value-neutral judgments—and adamant cynics about nearly everything else. And all of them are an implicit rebuke to presidential candidates whose idea of "virtue" revolves around the effect and efficacy of their lies or whose notion of manliness always seems to involve denigrating women.

Yet people are flocking to see "Sully"—as of this writing, the movie is on its way to earning \$100 million at the box office—precisely because it celebrates these ideals and behaviors. We want our sons to be Sully. We want them to rise above personal postures, and our decayed culture. We want more than the dismal choices in this political season.

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