

## *Engaging satirical flick for the whole family*

*Story and Screenplay by Steve Oedekerk*

*Directed by Tom Shadyac*

Steve Carell ... Evan Baxter

Morgan Freeman ... God

Lauren Graham ... Joan Baxter

John Goodman ... Congressman Chuck Long

Wanda Sykes ... Rita Daniels

John Michael Higgins ... Marty Stringer

Molly Shannon ... Eve Adams

No, *Evan Almighty* is not a contender for the Oscars, much less a serious threat to unseat political satire-comedy classics such as *Wag the Dog*, *American Dreamz*, or *Man of the Year*. But it's a reasonably intelligent family-friendly spoof of power politics and an extremely funny deflation of the socially ambitious political personality.

Evan Baxter (Steve Carell) is one such ambitious, though well-meaning, poli-person. The film begins with Evan leveraging his TV news persona to win a race for the United States Congress. It's always been his dream to reach this pinnacle of public service, and he's also firmly attached to the frills of the job: a monster trophy home in the hills of Virginia, first-class office and staff, chauffeur and special parking privileges.

His first day on the job, neighboring Congressman Chuck Long (John Goodman), who has been in office for a long time, approaches Baxter to pre-endorse Long's self-serving land-use bill. Long feels Baxter's notoriety and his cultivated anchor-man good looks—we see Baxter spending 10 minutes over the sink shaving and removing his nose hairs—will give Long the credibility he needs to push the bill through.

Baxter aims to please, but is conscientious to the point of insisting he, Baxter, read the bill first, which turns out to be several volumes! He's promised his wife (Lauren Graham) and kids to go nature hiking when he gets home from his first day, and now he isn't able to. So what are his priorities, right?

To make matters worse, some unknown person is shipping to the new Baxter house large bundles of lumber and a cartons of strange, antique woodworking tools. Then this smiling old black man (Morgan Freeman) materializes at awkward times. Evan is the only one who can see the man. The man identifies himself as God and instructs Evan to build an ark.

So that's the basic setup.

Without going into much detail, the injunction to build the ark causes Evan no end of anxiety; he resists as long as possible. But God's agenda dominates—part of God's persuasiveness is turning Evan from his highly manicured, dapper image into a hirsute Noah, producing several hilarious fashion faux pas sequences—causing Evan to slip off the fast track with Congressman Long and Evan's family to wonder about his sanity. Evan's Congressional staff, especially his secretary Rita (played with admirable comic restraint by Wanda Sykes), also does a double-take.

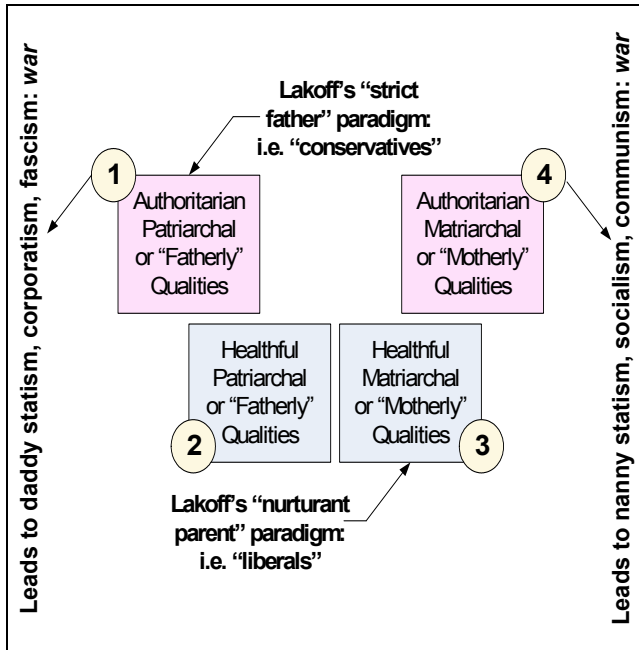
Speaking of hilarious sequences: an upshot of Evan struggling with the notion of building an ark finally has him doing something together with his three boys. (According to the DVD extras, the producers actually arrange for the layout and construction of a Biblically dimensioned ark! Seeing how such an ark might have been built is truly fascinating, it appeals to the Red Green Show side of your average guy.) Steve Carell's gags and pratfalls during the construction scenes are worthy of Buster Keaton or Chevy Chase, and left me rolling around laughing my ass off.

Basically, I find the movie to be a kids' movie that adults, at least adults like me, can thoroughly enjoy. You can see the unsubtle theme being advocated: be true to your family and Mother Nature, and they'll be true to you; as a corollary, the true slimy politicians are those who feather their own nests (by serving powerful corporate interests). I'm fine with that anti-corporate greed theme, but I'd like to make a couple of comments in clarification.

*By the way, my review is basically over now, what remains is in the nature of a brief discussion thread, perhaps someday to serve as the basis for a full commentary:*

In the book discussion group I belong to we just finished with a book that I reviewed on my site, *Moral Politics* by George Lakoff. Dr. Lakoff attempts to explain the difference between conservative and liberal ideology by attributing 'strict father' morality to the former and 'nurturant parent' morality to the latter. He proceeds to treat 'strict father' as punitive and authoritarian (i.e. pathological) and 'nurturant parent' as reasonable and psychologically healthy.

In other words, without really delving into the libertarian concept of the nonaggression principle and individual rights, Lakoff leaves us with what Aristotle called the "fallacy of the excluded option." In political reality, what we have is expressed in the following diagram:



(I apologize for the lousy graphics, I still have to figure out how to keep image and lettering clarity when resizing.[1])

Anyway, you can see what Lakoff does to conservatives is put them in the pathological category (#1) along with George Bush, Dick Cheney, Rudy Giuliani, and a host of other fascist pukers who are not conservatives at all. At the same time, he blithely ignores the pathological category for liberals (#4) that includes Hillary Clinton, FDR, and other would-be social and economic collectivists who aren't (classical, freethinking) true liberals. In other words, according to Lakoff, the only good conservative is a corporatist (like the stereotypical John Goodman character in the movie), therefore bad; the only good liberal is a good liberal, therefore good.[2]

Well, this is a big topic as one can see; I'll deal with it at length eventually. I bring it up here because Hollywood almost totally buys into the Lakoff model: You'll rarely if ever see a villain in a satirical film who wants to redistribute wealth from genuine producers to "society." (However, I'm hearing rumbles that Atlas Shrugged will be coming out pretty soon.)

[1] If any Web geeks out there can give me a tip, I'd sure appreciate it. I use Dreamweaver and it seems to only like .gif, .jpg, or .png image file formats.

[2] A corollary misperception that I see all the time (and have even written about in *The Rightwing Randian Blankout*) is a person of conservative orientation who denies that there can be liberals of nonauthoritarian disposition. Such a person often then aligns himself with pathological conservatives, feeling, irrationally, that anyone who speaks out against fascism or corporatism is a pathological, authoritarian liberal. This can have extremely harmful consequences to the body politic, and plays into the hands of the Cartel, which at its root is fully corporatist and has a vested interest in having good liberals and good conservatives fight each other and not it. (Good liberals and good conservatives are basically libertarians with slightly different priorities.)

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Evan Almighty | Steve Carell | Morgan Freeman | *Political Satire*