

Ex-Lawmaker Makes Directorial Debut With ‘The Congressman’

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[Robert Mrazek](#) represented a Long Island, N.Y., congressional district for a decade before retiring from the House of Representatives in 1993. He was just 48. His new career has included writing novels and his recent debut as co-director of “[The Congressman](#),” in which [Treat Williams](#) plays a congressman engulfed in a media-driven controversy over his failure to cite the Pledge of Allegiance every day on the House floor. A work trip to a remote island off the coast of Maine gives him an escape and a new outlook on his life and career.



Mrazek wrote the script, which has elements of his own life. For instance, he has owned a retreat on the remote Maine island of Monhegan for 30 years.

“The contrast between the culture in Washington today, with the partisanship, the inability to work together, and the culture on this island, where there are about 75 people who live there year round,” Mrazek says. “A lot of them don’t like one another, but they know they have to work together in common cause to make it.”

He also was one of the members of Congress who did not routinely recite the pledge at the start of each session. But there are big differences from the culture in Washington when he was there, to now.

“I don’t think there is any comparison between the kind of media firestorm that can be generated today and what would have occurred back then,” he said. “Now with the 24/7 news cycle, it is an entirely different world from when I was there.”

Mrazek actually attended London Film School in 1968, but turned to a career in politics. In the 1980s he became friends with director Fred Zinnemann, who along with other directors were concerned about the colorization of classic movies. Mrazek led the push for the Film Preservation Act, which established the National Film Registry and prevents classic movies from being materially altered without labeling and disclosure.

Much of “The Congressman” focuses on the relationships between Williams’ character, Charlie Winship, and the residents on the island. Williams calls it “a little comedy with a big heart where politics is the backdrop.”

The media firestorm is ignited when someone shoots cell phone video of Winship with his feet on the desk in the House chamber and ignoring the Pledge of Allegiance.

“It does examine the ability in this day to manipulate. Everything can get filmed with cell phones,” Williams says. “You can edit something somebody said and absolutely make it look like the reverse.”

He adds, “I just think that everybody wants to find some sort of peace, and I think in this film Charlie gets some kind of opportunity to reboot and discover a different way of seeing the world.”

Mrazek, who directed the movie with Jared Martin, says that shooting the movie was hardly serenity and simplicity. He noted that it was a 20-day schedule, 13 of which were on the island where there was no central electricity.

The movie screened at the Sarasota Film Festival earlier this month and will screen in New York and Washington on April 29.

Mrazek said that he hopes that the movie “will provide some insight into what the job is like, on the inside.”

But he doesn’t seem to have much regret about no longer being an elected representative working in Washington.

“It was an entirely different climate,” he says. “Today it is just awful. I don’t know who would want to have the job.”