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WHITE HOUSE LETTER

Even Bush, No Movie Buff, Enjoys Getting Big Picture

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Washington

The Oscars have come and gone, the mermaid dresses on the actresses have been dissected, Chris Rock has been reviewed. One question related to the White House remains: how does the president of the United States avoid feeling clueless about the national conversation on movies good and bad?

Unlike Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, the Connecticut Democrat who turned up at a Georgetown theater to see "Master and Commander" the weekend after he gave up on the 2004 presidential race, President Bush can't just drop by his neighborhood multiplex.

So as a lot of people know, he watches first-run films in the White House movie theater, a cushy 40-seat room on the ground floor near the entrance to the East Wing. The theater has been updated over the years, but its most extensive renovation came during the made-for-Hollywood presidency of Ronald Reagan, when the major studios of the time - Disney, Universal, Fox, Paramount, Columbia, MGM and Warner Brothers - put up \$150,000 to make sure the president watched their wares in an environment as cosseted as the screening room of an entertainment mogul.

Friends of the Bush family say the president is not as big a movie fan as was Reagan, who memorably watched "The Sound of Music" in his hotel room rather than reading his briefing books before the 1983 summit of industrial democracies in Williamsburg, Va. Mr. Bush is not even as big a movie fan as is his father, who regularly had people to the White House theater for evenings of hot dogs and popcorn.

Still, this year Mr. Bush has seen three films: "The Aviator," the Leonardo DiCaprio best-picture nominee about the early life of Howard Hughes; "Paper Clips," a documentary about middle school students in rural Tennessee who collect six million paper clips to understand the enormity of the Holocaust and to honor the six million Jews who died; and "Hotel Rwanda," about a flesh-and-blood hero, Paul Rusesabagina, the manager of a real-life luxury hotel, the Milles Collines. Mr. Rusesabagina saved the lives of more than 1,200 people when he sheltered them in his rooms during the genocide in his country in 1994.

The president saw "Paper Clips" and "Hotel Rwanda" late on recent Saturday afternoons, along with a small group of friends and senior White House staff members. Abraham H. Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, who had pestered the White House to show "Paper Clips," was there when the film was screened the day before Mr. Bush left for a trip to Europe last month.

Late last year, Mr. Bush saw "Friday Night Lights," about the power of high school football in Odessa, Tex., which he branded his favorite film of 2004. One movie he saw on Air Force One, where he more often watches sports on his big-screen television, was "Spellbound," a nail-biting documentary about eight contestants in the 1999 National Spelling Bee in Washington.

Laura Bush sees more movies than does her husband, including the best-picture Oscar winner, "Million Dollar Baby," which she watched in the White House theater with friends on a recent weekday afternoon.

The movies are sent overnight directly from the studios, in 35-millimeter film format, as soon as the White House requests them. The system was set up many presidencies ago by Jack Valenti, the adviser to President Lyndon B. Johnson and the recently retired president of the Motion Picture Association of America.

Mr. Valenti noted that President Richard M. Nixon's favorite movie was "Patton," which he watched many times. Not so L.B.J. "He showed movies, but not a lot, because he went right to sleep," Mr. Valenti said.

Presidents get Hollywood perks beyond first-run movies, of course. Perhaps the ultimate one is the power to summon people connected to the movies for conversations afterward. Mr. Bush did that last month with Mr. Rusesabagina, the wily and courageous hotel manager in "Hotel Rwanda" who was played in the film by Don Cheadle.

On Feb. 15, after the White House contacted MGM, the film's distributor, Mr. Rusesabagina found himself in the Oval Office discussing "Hotel Rwanda" with Mr. Bush, Laura Bush and senior White House staff members.

"Don Cheadle is an actor," Mr. Rusesabagina said in a telephone interview on Friday from his home in Brussels, where he now lives. "He is a messenger." The president, he said, "wanted to know who was the person behind the story, the real life behind Hotel Rwanda."

Mr. Rusesabagina said that Mr. Bush was well briefed. "He was informed about everything," he said. "He knew everything that happened in Hotel Collines. He was asking me why did I decide to do that? And then at the end, he said I had done what any human being should have done."

The president and Mr. Rusesabagina also talked about the mass killings in the Darfur region of Sudan, which the United States has labeled genocide. Mr. Rusesabagina

reported that "he's interested in what is going on in Sudan, he's following that closely, and he's committed to finding a solution."

Beyond that, Mr. Rusesabagina said the president gave no indication of what he might do. "Sometimes when you talk with a president," Mr. Rusesabagina said, "you have to know that some questions will not be answered."