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Subject: The Graduate

What's happening?

This year, 2015, begins the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the production and release of one of the last century's top movies, *The Graduate*. Only a year or two after its release in late 1967, *The Graduate* was on most top ten lists. Now it's still well inside the top twenty for the century. For me personally it's up there with *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca* and a couple others. Let me explain why.

In 1963 the author Charles Webb published his short novel, *The Graduate*. Webb had just finished college at Williams, where he wrote the book, mostly, in his senior year. The idea that a loser like Benjamin Braddock could knock around with his father's partner's wife and then fall in love with her daughter figured for a marketable Hollywood plot. Webb sold the movie rights for \$20,000.

*The Graduate* was shopped around Hollywood and turned down by all the major studios. Finally in 1965, the movie deal found some financial backing and casting began in earnest. Robert Redford was the front runner to play Ben, but the director Mike Nichols concluded Redford was too good-looking, too much of a winner. Dustin Hoffman surfaced from his upstart's struggles with the New York stage and was named Ben. Mrs. Robinson, Ben's father's partner's wife, was targeted by Ava Gardner, but Gardner was too old. Mrs. Robinson, it turned out, was given to Anne Bancroft, 36 years old playing 45. And Mrs. Robinson's daughter Elaine was originally Candace Bergen and eventually Katharine Ross.

In the movie Ben graduated college in the East and came home to Beverly Hills with no direction or intention. He did all right academically, suitable for graduate school applications. He was physically fit, having been a member of the cross-country team. At the beginning of the movie, he was 20 years old, about to turn 21.

Get the dates straight. Ben was a 20-year-old healthy and happy college

graduate in the mid-1960s with no further draft deferment after college such as medical school or divinity school. He had no goals, at least not any he shared with his parents. The movie was made in 1966 and 1967, and it was released in December, 1967, the peak of the build-up in the Vietnam War, which by then had some 500,000 American service men in country. In the previous decade they got Elvis, who had to serve two years in the army, and in the mid-1950s there was no hot spot in the world, just peaceful maintenance. Still, Elvis Pressley was drafted, and for the next ten years every young man in America between the ages of 18 and 26 planned on either getting drafted or planned on a deferment or a move to Canada or elsewhere.

Then the Vietnam War expanded and just about all of America's eligible young men could see the real possibility of being called up. Avoidance was the order of the day, especially among the connected and the educated. The national guard and the reserves filled up, probably the most legitimate means in avoiding the draft - honorable, actually, particularly if a play in politics was in the future.

Ben had no thought in his mind about being called up or about dodging the draft altogether. When he was asked what he planned to do now that he was out of school, there was no mention whatsoever about the Vietnam War or the draft or a peaceful alternative, such as the Peace Corps.

Released in late 1967, The Graduate ticket sales did really well in the winter and spring and summer of 1968, a time frame that included the Tet Offensive, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. The movie goes through The Graduate while the world went through chaos and death, and nowhere in the movie was there a mention of the war or even one word about the JFK assassination of late 1963. In the movie Ben and Elaine's crowd didn't take notice.

The glaring absence of any mention of such issues and events was profoundly intentional. Director Mike Nichols never said, but obviously he wanted to picture the Vietnam War as immoral and the draft as unfair, both burning issues of the day all the while The Graduate was in production. The best way to highlight his objections was to not say anything at all about them – just let Beverly Hills Ben work on his tan in his parent's backyard pool while he worked on both Mrs. Robinson and her daughter Elaine. Meanwhile, he let the lower echelons go to war.