

Scenario

Coriolanus

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This scenario is a retelling of the story of the mythical Roman hero Coriolanus, strongly inspired by Shakespeare's tragedy. It is recast in our present political environment: the familiar story of a third-party candidate (a war hero), who detests conventional politics and the demagogues ruling the people.

Coriolanus is a wealthy businessman with military experience; a self-made man who thinks of America as his next financial conquest, an entity to be bought, chaired, and revitalized, like Detroit steel or Bell telephone.

The first scene of the play takes place in the studio of a TV talk show. The crowd is agitated; host Menenius Agrippa calms them, and Caius Marcius (Coriolanus) calls in as digital messiah. His utter confidence in the effectiveness of his leadership sways the audience: here, at last, is a leader with all the answers.

The next scene takes place in Coriolanus' office: Menenius tries to convince him to run for office. Coriolanus considers politics beneath him, but Menenius is able to convince him to campaign by appealing to his pride.

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[The set of a low-budget talk show. Vinyl furniture in primary colors, worn carpet, potted plants in odd places to cover worn upholstery and wallpaper stains. A motley audience in folding chairs, an applause sign, and a host (Mennie) with a hand-held wireless microphone.]

[The guests for the day are Frank, a working truck-driver; Larry, an apprentice electrician; and Sally, a secretary for the industrial supply house down the road. A very large monitor sits above stage, currently dead, and a smaller monitor on which we can see the poor-quality video that is being broadcast live. It's a two-camera shoot.]

SALLY: It's just terrible the way things are. These schmucks in government are just totally corrupt—I didn't even know who to vote for last election, I didn't vote at all. The TV news was saying how the one senator was taking bribes, and the other involved in that terrible child-murder case...

MENNIE: Senators Ell and Snark, yes...

FRANK: They're all corrupt. I say get rid o' all of them. Throw the bums out!

LARRY: I got just one thing to say to all y'all. One thing. Union.

SALLY: I don't know...

LARRY: The union's where it's at. We got to stand together.

FRANK: Together, yeah. I'm marchin' on DC tomorrow. Driving my rig down, we're going to park them everywhere, keep those patsy senator from getting to work without dealing with US.

[Mennie has found an opposing viewpoint in the audience, a bald white guy with a belly.]

MENNIE: *[Low voice, giving him the go-ahead.]* Tell us your side.

AUDIENCE 1: The unions are in it together with the government and the rest of them. It's all part of the New World Order plan to enslave us all with the mind-control devices and taxes. I know what my constitution says.

It says that... *[Mennie has left this fellow, but he goes on screaming from the audience, mic-less]* ...all government is of, by and for the people. Government has no jurisdiction over us unless we give it that right. No one asked me; I haven't given up nothing!

LARRY: The union stands up for you, man — you can't get those suits in Washington to listen to anything unless you take it into your own hands. I mean a couple guys, not one — a whole room-full, going to DC and screwing the government like it screws us.

AUDIENCE 1: I haven't given them any right. I haven't signed anything. No one asked me!

LARRY: If it was just one person, they'd throw him in jail and you'd never hear nothing again. But my brothers and me in the union, we stand together. And brothers like this guy, here...

MENNIE: *[helpfully]* Frank.

LARRY: ...this guy, he and his union will pull for us if we get stuck. We all stick together.

AUDIENCE 1: What do you know of your organizers? How do you know who they're working for? They're all selling you down the river like sheep!

[The audience member beside the first (a middle-aged black woman) now gets up and starts berating him, annoyed at his insistence and yelling.]

AUDIENCE 2: You gotta have faith in the System, you gotta have faith. How you gonna tell who's working for who, ever? You gotta get to know them, talk to them, trust them. You just yelling out garbage about nothin' 'cause you got no friends and nobody likes you.

[Everyone starts to speak at once as we dissolve into a vocal melee.]

MENNIE: Now...

AUDIENCE 1: You can't trust nobody. Only the paranoid survive!

FRANK: You can trust the union. They work for you, they keep your job, they make sure you get paid. The suits would step all over you otherwise. Just look at history, man. The Industrial Revolution.

LARRY: My brothers and me, we stand together. That's what it's about.
[putting his arm over Frank's shoulders.]

MENNIE: Perhaps we'd better go to a commercial. . .

[The vocal fisticuffs are interrupted by the bass hum of the large TV monitor coming to life. The screen flickers, and illuminates with the broad smiling face of Coriolanus, larger-than-life. He wears an expensive suit, and the American flag is in the background. A military flair to his attire clearly reminds us he's a war hero.]

[High quality video. The difference is obvious to viewers at home, as well as on the smaller broadcast monitor.]

MENNIE: Welcome, Corey.

[The audience is hushed.]

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COREY: Good morning, Menenius. It's good to be here.

MENNIE: You stepped right into the middle of a . . . er, spirited discussion. . . *[Corey chuckles]*

COREY: I know what people are worried about. These are rough times. The current administration has botched things up, and we're suffering as a result. What this country needs is leadership. A strong man who can lead this country back around. I've submitted a detailed plan for balancing the budget: someone needs to have the courage and implement it. My racial progress bill would make the first true steps towards greater ethnic harmony since Martin Luther King. We need a congressman to propose and ensure its passage. Over the past six months, I've been investigating each branch of government, and I'm confident that there are solutions to the problems and corruption rooted in each.

MENNIE: This sounds fantastic. Sounds too good to be true.

COREY: It's true. You just have a bunch of lunkheads running this country who couldn't solve a 15-piece jigsaw puzzle, much less the problems facing the country.

LARRY: That's why we need the union. The government can't do nothing for us working people.

COREY: Each little attempt at progress is beneficial, yes, but what this country needs is a unified effort from a strong leader who can lead this country back onto the path that made our country great. We need another Tom Jefferson, another George Washington. An honest politician, and no, my friends, that is not a contradiction in terms.

MENNIE: You certainly seem to have this country's problems all solved, Corey; perhaps after this commercial break you can tell us why these solutions aren't being tried. *[Turns to camera.]* Stay with us, folks; we'll be right back. *[Hold and freeze for a second, then the camera goes off the air and the monitors show silent commercials.]*

That was quite an oration, Corey.

COREY: It's the simple truth, Mennie. *[Looks at his watch.]*

MENNIE: Will you have time to stay with us?

COREY: Unfortunately, no. I'm due at the Capitol building in a few minutes.

MENNIE: Aren't you going to be late? Where are you, exactly?

COREY: Oh, I'm at home; my helicopter's waiting outside the door. I'll get there on time *[Looks at his watch.]* . . . if I leave right now. Forgive me, please.

[He leaves the monitor's frame, and seconds later the monitor breaks into static, then goes dark. A beat later, the blank screen is replaced by a still photo of Corey.]

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MENNIE: *[Relaxed, temporarily off-air. Turns to his guests.]* Some guy, huh?
[Heads nod. He gets a signal, a five-count, and then he's back on air. He turns to the camera.]

I must apologize to our viewing audience; Corey had to leave during the commercial to talk some sense into those bums on Capitol Hill. But I think he left us with plenty to talk about. *[Turning again to his guests.]* So, what did y'all think?

SALLY: Wow.

LARRY: I don't think he really appreciates the amount of work the union's doing for us.

SALLY: But he's right: we need more than your union or my fund-raisers or the kids' PTA. We need a leader.

LARRY: That's fine and all, but where's this leader going to come from?

FRANK: I think I'd like to see those solutions he was talking about. He should publish a book or something.

SALLY: He should run for office, is what he should do. I'd vote for him, sure.

MENNIE: What about you guys?

LARRY: I don't know.

FRANK: Yeah, I guess I'd vote for him. At least he *thinks* he knows the answers. The other clowns we've got in Washington don't have a clue.

LARRY: Maybe if he supported the union, I'd vote for him. But I'd have to see him at a meeting. I'd want to make sure he knew what it was like for us.

MENNIE: *[Turns to the on-stage audience.]* Does the audience agree?

[The room breaks up in a confused murmur of assent, except for the conspiracy theorist, who yells out:]

AUDIENCE 1: He's one of them. I saw it! He's in on it!

[The lights fade.]

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[Corey's office. A meeting with Mennie.]

COREY: I certainly didn't expect to see you down in DC today, Mennie.

MENNIE: I just finished taping for the day. A special on the Senate sex scandal.

COREY: Of course. You rent a motel room for the taping?

MENNIE: For the re-enactment. [Corey grimaces.] It's what the public wants.

COREY: Yes, yes.

MENNIE: I actually thought the discussion was quite mature, given the twisted subject.

COREY: Mature for a talk-show, perhaps.

MENNIE: Come on now, you gotta give me some credit. I'm broadcasting what the public *really feels* about these issues. The government's supposed to be listening to these people.

COREY: Congressmen watching daytime television for advice on running the country. God forbid.

MENNIE: [Insulted.] It's my job, Corey. I'm doing this because, deep down, I really believe that *somebody* needs to be listening to these folks. [Changing the topic to something less sensitive.] But that's not why I'm here.

COREY: And why is that?

MENNIE: I don't know if you realize it, Corey, but my audience is still talking about your visit to my show last month. Every politician who drops by has to endure comparisons of their schemes...

COREY: Or lack thereof.

MENNIE: To the fifty words you spoke on-air. Tell me the truth, Corey. Do you *really* think the solution is as easy as you made it seem?

COREY: Why not? The problems are straight-forward.

MENNIE: Most people would disagree.

COREY: Politicians especially.

MENNIE: Why?

COREY: They're not leaders. They haven't been in the world, pulled themselves up, learned how to make a buck and how to run a business. If they can't run the neighborhood K-Mart, how are they going to run the country?

MENNIE: Surely there must be some of them who...

COREY: No one. The political atmosphere in this country discourages idealists, men of ideas, anyone who's not willing to lie and cheat, play the game, succeed in Washington. The country needs an honest man, an honest businessman. To him, the country's problems are trivial. Large-scale, perhaps, but trivial.

MENNIE: You really have that report on government?

COREY: The solutions file? Certainly. *[He pulls a thick manila folder out to show to Mennie, then replaces it in the cabinet.]*

MENNIE: Your balanced budget?

COREY: Yup.

MENNIE: Why aren't you in government, then? Why don't you fix America?

COREY: I'm not a politician, Mennie. I'm a leader, a businessman, a citizen. The kind of people that watch your shows disgust me, Mennie. They're not going to vote for me.

MENNIE: They will. They've been clamoring for you. You are the only politician they're talking about, these days. Your military record, your plans to change government...

COREY: *[Laughs.]* Nice try, Mennie. I'm just not cut out for that job.

MENNIE: I think you could be. I think your duty to your country is to try.

COREY: My duty to my country is to write up the solutions to its problems, and give it to a ragabash-kissing politico to attempt. Find that man for me, and I'll visit your show again, do whatever it takes to help him implement my plan. *[Looks at watch.]* I've got a meeting in five. Thanks for dropping by, Mennie.

MENNIE: Yeah. Thanks. *[He leaves.]*