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Quick-tongued, with eyes that light up the sky, Mel Gibson is the heart of *Air America*—and the element that throws it off course. He's an ironist in a cynical world, a romantic hero trapped in an interminable *Saturday Night Live* skit and trying to be a good sport about it. If Gibson is distinguished by his balance of conviviality and reserve, his costar Robert Downey Jr., a more mercurial actor, can shift from callow to incandescent in a single breath. Like his contemporary, Nicolas Cage, Downey is capable of extended, high-energy behavioral riffs that are one step away from stand-up.

Unless you're seriously into stunt flying or you've misplaced your collection of late-'60s rock, the only reason to see *Air America*—a not nearly black enough comedy about the CIA's covert operations in Laos during the Vietnam War—is the actors. *Air America*, the CIA's private airline, flew weapons, food, an entire secret army, and, of course, opium all over Indochina. If you knew about *Air America*, Iran-contra couldn't have come as a surprise. "No one's ever won a war in this part of the world without drug money," explains veteran pilot Gene Ryack (Gibson) to the idealistic recruit Billy Covington (Downey). Gene takes Billy under his wing and teaches him all about crash-landing—basically that the longer it takes, the stranger the location, and the weirder the position you wind up in, the better it is for pilot and audience alike. First Billy crashes a two-engine. Then Gene crashes a copter. Then Billy crashes a copter right in the middle of the wrecked two-engine. (He was looking for camouflage.)

Like us, Billy can't understand what a decent guy like Gene is doing hanging around the jungle playing miniature golf with a bunch of amoral *Air America* cowboys. Gene's made some moves toward getting out, but he's still hooked on the adrenalin of flying. "I used to believe in all these wars," he says. "I defended the politics of Saturday night ... It's not bad but it's not true either. I hear they party pretty hard in Moscow."

Coming 20 years before *glasnost*, this is pretty progressive talk. Actually, *Air America* makes a bunch of hip connections. According to the epilogue, after the withdrawal from Vietnam, the CIA honchos and their Asian stooges found many other interesting things to do, like running S & Ls or working for Noriega. Nevertheless, a movie in which being a mercenary is like having a 10-year pass to Playland begs a whole series of questions. No matter. Given the events of the past two weeks, it's doubtful that *Air America* will ever get off the ground.

BY AMY TAUBIN

"*Air America*." Directed by Roger Spottiswoode. Written by John Eskow and Richard Rush, from the book by Christopher Robbins. Produced by Daniel Melnick. A Carolco production. Released by Tri-Star.