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## Invasion USA: Setting, Plot, and National Identity in Cold War Films

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According to Cold War Hollywood, when international relations heat up, the conflict bypasses actual fighting and escalates directly to nuclear annihilation. Films like *The Day The World Ended* (1956), *On The Beach* (1959), and *The Day After* (1983) are paradigmatic, showing that conventional warfare, with real soldiers facing one another on a battlefield, is a thing of the past in an age of atomic bombs and the ICBM. Within this context, the possibility of an invading army was nearly inconceivable—what fools would risk invading North America when they know that the U.S. would retaliate by destroying their entire hemisphere? Historically speaking, this invincible attitude extends even deeper into the American subconscious. For two hundred years, all U.S. wars have been fought on foreign soil, never at home (notable exceptions include Pearl Harbor and the Southern perspective on the Civil War). Simply put, America does not get invaded.

In contrast to the nuclear realism of most Cold War film, there is a small sub-genre that explores the impossible—What if the Communists actually arrived in force? What if there was a limited nuclear engagement followed by ground troops? What if isolated acts of terrorism were coordinated into a coherent battle strategy? U.S. invasion films are not common, but because they deal with fundamental psychological issues of Territory and Home, they provide a focused look at how Americans understand themselves in relation to their land. This study examines how setting and plot can work to establish national identity as a function of geographic occupation. By learning about how Hollywood depicts Americans facing a local and personal threat (invasion), as opposed to a global and impersonal one (nuclear missile attack), we can develop a better understanding of American identity under the most primal stress—defending one's home.

To allow for focus and depth, this essay is limited to the late Cold War, specifically the Reagan era. After a brief description of the Cold War context, its films, and the U.S. Invasion sub-genre, two Reagan-era invasion films, *Red Dawn* (Millius 1984) and *Invasion U.S.A.* (Zito 1985), are critiqued in terms of how they relate setting, plot, and national identity. The basic finding is that these films identify America's citizenry as naive, unprepared, and even decadent people who take their freedoms for granted. Their identity is not based on political, economic, or religious ideals, it is based on geographic location. There are a few heroes who will attempt to defend the masses, but they are rare men of strength among a generally defenseless population.

#### THE COLD WAR

The Cold War generally dates from 1945 to 1991, but the anticommunist movement in U.S. foreign and nuclear policy did not simply appear after World War II. Communists and Socialists had been active in the U.S. since the mid-nineteenth century, and they became particularly vocal from the late twenties throughout the Great Depression (Hoover 1963). Their detractors were equally vocal; in the national arena Republicans repeatedly decried the socialist spirit of Roosevelt's New Deal, but after Pearl Harbor domestic disagreements were set aside in favor of wartime unity.

Despite the fact that the United States was allied with Russia, anticommunist sentiment resurfaced as the war continued. "Even before the war was over, Clare Booth Luce had said that 'the Communist Party has gone underground, like termites, into the Democratic Party'" (Sayre 1982: 11). When the war ended, a bewildering array of factors coalesced to bring about the Cold War. In addition to the pre-existing anticommunist agenda, 1950s America saw an unexpected economic boom, a younger marriage age, and an enormously inflated birth rate. Affluence enabled these new families to move from the cities to the suburbs, and faith in technology's ability to advance society was unquestionable.

Beneath all of this optimism and faith in progress, there was a much darker undercurrent of paranoid fear. Modernism was at its peak, Americans were fighting in Korea, Senator McCarthy was conducting his hearings, and the popular arts turned inward, away from social responsibility. Because memories of the utter devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were fresh in the national memory, every American understood the finality of the nuclear threat. The delicate balance between superpowers was thought to be so precarious that lead lined bomb shelters and regular emergency drills were a part of everyday life.

As the 1960s dawned, the baby boom began to come of age. Raised in an age of plenty, the "new" middle class youth had little appreciation for the conservative fear of their elders who had lived through the Depression and World War II. The war in Viet Nam is the paradigm issue for this era; halting the spread of Communism by participating in Asian civil wars was a foreign policy completely alien to the '60s youth ideals of peace, love, freedom, and happiness. When the war finally ended in the '70s, disillusionment was at an all time high. Nixon's Watergate scandal revealed hypocrisy and corruption at the top of a government system that had been unquestionable only twenty years earlier. Carter's presidency marks a Democratic and Christian turn in politics, but it took Ronald Reagan, the Republican Party's "great communicator," to revive America's pride in itself.

Reagan fostered an American sense of purpose via the classic pattern of identification through division. That is, he reminded the United States that there was an enemy to unite against, the "evil empire" of the Soviet Socialist Republics. Identity was restored by directing attention toward an external threat; stressing the division between Us and Them works to minimize the significance of internal differences in opinion (Burke 1950). With such a strong external threat looming on the horizon, We must work together or They will remove all debate. In Reagan's schema, not banding together against the Soviets is unpatriotic or even criminal; who among you would not protect the world's sole bastion of freedom and democracy?

With her 1986 study of *Red Faces* in Hollywood war films, Marcia Pally insightfully captures the aggressively patriotic spirit of Reagan's '80s. In describing the appeal of *Rocky IV*, where Balboa finally beats the Soviet boxing champion Drago after fifteen rounds, she writes

There are a lot of insulted patriots out there eager for just this sort of vengeance. Any ad exec could've told you back in 1980 that this was the way the media would go. Americans were panicky then—what with the oil mess and Iran and Nicaragua. Reagan's elixir: we've been Number One all along. Though we face the mighty atheist Russian foe, we are going to rebuild our big sticks so that we never have to do anything but talk softly again. We will regain grace. And we did what the desperate do: we bought it, on faith. Craving a graven image of bygone hegemony, we knelt low and closed our eyes. We made him our leader so he could sell us his salve for eight blissfully unthinking years. (32)

The U.S. desired stability and a firm identity, and Reagan met these needs by directing national attention outward, toward the Soviet enemy. Ronald Reagan was no newcomer to the anti-communist movement. For

people like him who had worked in Hollywood throughout McCarthy's investigations, it was impossible to avoid the issue of American Communism. Early on, Reagan had planted himself firmly in the conservative anti-communist camp. In 1951, speaking as president of the Screen Actor's Guild, he identified the theme that would unify his presidential campaign three decades later—"the real aim of the Communist Party is to try to prepare the way for Russian conquest of the world"(qtd. in Potter 1996: 29).

#### COLD WAR FILM

The major difference between Reagan in the '50s and Reagan in the '80s is that his attention shifts from McCarthy's internal threat, the American Communist Party and collaborators, to the fore-mentioned external threat, the imperial designs of the Soviet Union. This is the same pattern that Hollywood film followed. In the 1950s, there were two primary external fears, nuclear annihilation and communist infiltration. Most movies stressed one or the other. The nuclear subset, such as *The Day the World Ended* depicted the results of full-scale atomic war—an irradiated wasteland where mutated people and wildlife prey upon each other and the few healthy humans that remain. Rather than present an external enemy, this film begins with an atomic exchange that destroys both sides—all that is left is the local battle against perverted nature and the elements. Other films in this category include *On The Beach* (1959), and, later, *Damnation Alley* (1977).

The infiltration scenario was played out in both realistic spy thrillers and science fiction suspense films. Spy films like *I Married a Communist* (1950) and *Pickup on South Street* (1953) showed how absolutely *anyone* could be a subversive agent working to undermine and overthrow the U.S. government. Among the science fiction films, some followed the *War of the Worlds* model and recounted alien attacks, but the more telling scenario involves quiet cooption of the American people, as with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). In his study of cinematic bogey men, Strada points out that the

thrust of the 50s' alien invader films is simple, consistent, and heavyhanded: these beings are very unlike us, they are evil, and they threaten our civilization of humane values... The majority of the invader films ... operate at the subtext level with malefic aliens serving as surrogates for communist aggression. The sub-genre which best captures the mood of 50s' paranoia involves the subtle transformation of plain old folks like "Uncle Ira," "Bill Farrell," and "George MacLean" into alien counterfeits, or sinister clones, in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

(1956), *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958), and *Invaders from Mars* (1953). (1987: 250)

Overall, the xenophobic films of the 1950s and early '60s encouraged local vigilance and nuclear preparedness.

In many films from the '60s and '70s, the paranoid fear of the older generation was questioned. Perhaps the federal government was not infallible; maybe it was the institutions themselves that generated war. Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1963) showed the extremes to which xenophobia could take us. Some films, like *The Green Berets* (1968), attempted to apply the patriotic spirit of earlier war films to Viet Nam, but the overwhelming judgment of this age was anti-war, not anti-communist. Two very popular war films from this period, *Apocalypse Now* (1978) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978), both argue that "war itself, not any external enemy, is the threat to civilized values . . . war is an insane hell which produces only victims" (Strada 1987: 263). Even the aliens become more friendly, as with *E.T.* (1982) and *Cocoon* (1985).

In the '70s and '80s, conventional war films depicting large-scale engagements tended to disappear. Instead, conflict was represented as an irrational disruption of the international power balance. Philip French cites Bronson's *Telefon* (1978) to show that during this period,

Hollywood movies took the view that only a few renegades threatened world peace and that men of good will on both sides could work together. Typically, in the thriller "Telefon" (1978), a KGB officer (Charles Bronson) comes to America neither to defect nor to subvert but to defeat the diabolical plans of communist hardliners. (2)

This plot-line would have been inconceivable in 1958. Communists were not people that could be cooperated with; if you did cooperate with the KGB, you ceased to be an American and were liable to be imprisoned.

#### U.S. INVASION FILMS

Into the generally warming 1980s, Ronald Reagan reintroduced the ideals of traditional Cold Warfare into the American Public sphere. His military build-up and ill-conceived "Star Wars" anti-missile system represent a return to the hyper-alert defense policies of the '50s. One way that this conservative turn played itself out in popular culture was through a rare sub-genre of the American war movies, the Invasion film. In the '50s, this sub-genre had been serious business. For instance the first movie titled *Invasion U.S.A.* (Green, 1952, not the 1985 Chuck Norris film) got an

enthusiastic review from *Variety*.

Columbia has a potent exploitation release in this Albert Zugsmith-Robert Smith production, which imaginatively poses the situation of a foreign power invading the U.S. with atom bombs. Film is conducive to a "scare" promotional campaign for good returns in the general and exploitation markets. . . . Alaska has been invaded by a huge enemy air task force. Almost in minutes, further forces capture the state of Washington through the use of atom bombs. Action then has the enemy blasting eastward to destroy N.Y. and invade Washington, D.C. (Whit 2)

As it turns out, this plot ends up as a lesson in vigilance; the reports on the invasion are ultimately explained away as mass hypnosis, "the events pictured did not—but might—happen, if certain Americans don't rise above their lethargy."

If the '50s treated the idea of a U.S. Invasion as serious but not completely real, the warming '60s and '70s were able to treat the same theme as real but laughable—U.S. invasion became an opportunity for military comedies. In *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming!* (1966), for instance, a Soviet sub runs aground in Maine. Mayhem ensues as the townspeople decide that they are being invaded while the Russian sailors desperately try to head home. In 1979, Steven Spielberg's *1941* lampooned the Californian panic that followed the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Concerned civilians and deranged military personnel end up doing much more damage than the lone lost Japanese sub floating off the coast.

In the mid '80s, U.S. Invasion films turned away from comedy and back toward the action-adventure militarism of the old-fashioned war movies. Invasion films of the Reagan era took an aggressively patriotic stance and presented a clear external enemy that hadn't been seen since the '50s. The two films analyzed for this essay, *Red Dawn* (1984) and *Invasion U.S.A.* (1985) belong to this category. After a brief production and reception history, each film is critiqued in terms of what its setting and plot say about national identity.

### *Red Dawn*

*Red Dawn* was directed by John Milius from a screen-play he co-wrote with Kevin Reynolds (Reynolds also wrote *Waterworld*). Fifteen years into his career, Milius had already established himself as a successful Hollywood artist through his work on *Magnum Force*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Conan the Barbarian*, and *1941*. The production history for this film is unusual because it had involvement from the very top of the studio. Frank

Yablans, CEO of MGM/United Artists, recruited Ronald Reagan's former aide, General Alexander Haig, to serve as "ideological adviser" (Bart 1997). The fusion of Reynolds' invasion/resistance story with Milius' tradition of macho violence, Haig's xenophobic militarism, and Yablans' desire to profit from America's conservative turn generated a film that stands out as one of the most clearly right wing films of the entire Cold War.

Popular response was good; it made \$8.2 million on its first weekend, and eventually earned \$40 million total (Corliss 1984; Bart 1997). The critics generally panned *Red Dawn* for its violent anti-communism, moderate acting, implausible scenario, or depressing plot (*TV Guide*; *USA Today*; *Variety*). Parental groups also condemned the violence. It was the first film to earn the new PG-13 rating, and the National Coalition on Television Violence stated that *Red Dawn* is "the most violent film ever seen by NCTV in terms of the number of different acts of violence [134] per hour.... *Red Dawn* promotes intense hatred and open warfare against Russia, Cuba, and Nicaragua" (Christian Century).

The film is set in the small town of Calumet, nestled in Colorado's beautiful Rocky Mountains. It opens with a global scenario spelled out in short, factual sentences with red letters on a black screen. NATO has disbanded, the Russian grain harvest has failed, so the Soviets, Cubans, and Nicaraguans nuke select targets and then mount a conventional invasion from Mexico in the south and Alaska in the Northwest. The war hits Calumet when paratroopers land outside of the local high school and begin shooting teachers and students. Virtually defenseless, and especially so after gun registration records lead the Reds directly to the few armed citizens, the town is quickly subdued, and most of the adult men are placed in re-education camps. One small group of young men, including the football star and the class president, escape the high school assault, stock up on food and ammo, and flee to the rugged mountains surrounding the town. From this isolated wilderness they watch, wait, and eventually commit themselves to all-out guerilla warfare against the occupying army. Instead of an ultimate triumph, this small group, called the Wolverines after the school football team, experiences success mixed with self-doubt and betrayal, and most of them end up dying. America eventually wins the war, but not on-screen—this conclusion is left to a final voice-over narration.

So, what can setting and plot in *Red Dawn* tell us about American Cold War identity? The setting, rural Colorado (actually shot in New Mexico), is breathtaking. The mountains are rugged, beautiful, and pristine, and they grow even more so as winter sets in and the snow begins to fall. This purity of small town life set amid white mountaintops and broad

valleys gives the violent Communist invasion a degree of impact that simply would not be felt if this invasion had hit the well armed streets of New York or L.A. If we add the fact that Colorado is located in the very center of the country, the heartland, the magnitude of this invasion becomes immediately apparent. The basic conclusion we are invited to draw about U.S. identity is that almost the entire country has gone very soft—the Russians and Cubans have easily made it all the way to Calumet CO.

There are three scenes that work especially well at establishing a weak American identity through setting and plot. An hour into the film the Wolverines rescue Lt. Colonel Tanner, a downed fighter pilot, who brings them their first real news in over a month. He explains how Calumet was taken at the very beginning of the surprise Soviet attack on the entire country.

The first wave of the attack came in disguised as commercial charter flights, same way they did in Afghanistan in '80, but they were crack airborne outfits. Now, they took these passes in the Rockies... They coordinated with selective nuke strikes and the missiles were a hell of a lot more accurate than we thought. They took out the silos here in the Dakotas and key points of communication, ... like Omaha, Washington, Kansas City. Infiltrators came up illegal from Mexico, Cubans mostly, they managed infiltrate the SAC bases in the mid-west and several down in Texas and wreaked a hell of a lot of havoc ... they opened up the door down here and the whole Cuban and Nicaraguan armies come walkin' right through and roll right up here through the great plains... [they got] Cheyenne across to Kansas. We held 'em at the Rockies and at the Mississippi. Anyway, the Russians reinforced with 60 divisions, sent 3 whole army groups across the Bering Strait into Alaska, cut the pipeline, came across Canada to link up here in the middle, but we stopped their butt cold... The Russians need to take us in one piece and that's why they're here now that's why they won't use nukes anymore and that's why we won't either, not on our own soil.

This scene is set outdoors in the snow at the Wolverine camp. Milius emphasizes the national scope and visually demonstrates the intense quality of World War III by having Tanner map out the invasion routes by gesturing across the blazing Wolverine campfire. As they huddle in a circle around the fire in the mountains, we feel Wolverine despair mount as they realize that this battle ranges far beyond their small town in Colorado—the Russians want our rich farmland and they have come most of the way toward taking it. The invasion story is shot from behind and above the storyteller, giving the viewer a clear sense of scale—the entire

country is in flames and they are merely a cold group of children hiding in the mountains.

Second, on a more local level, the opening scene demonstrates just how vulnerable and unprepared Americans are. After establishing shots that introduce us to a typical morning in this sleepy small town, we join a history class in session at Calumet High School. As the teacher describes the inexorable "constricting circle" battle strategy of the ancient Mongol Army to a complacent and slightly bored set of teenagers, paratroopers begin to land outside. When the teacher goes outside to investigate, he is the first person killed in the invasion of Calumet. The soldiers proceed to fire upon the school itself, killing many of the fleeing students, and the battle spreads to the parking lot as the terrified students attempt to flee.

The power of this scene is unquestionable. It is a paradigm case of the bastardly attack and works as metaphor (synecdoche) for the entire film—innocent and blissfully unaware children are murdered by invaders from the sky. Because the Communist expansion policy went unchecked by weak American foreign policy, the Soviets now have us surrounded and they are constricting their circle, just like the vicious Mongols of the 10th century. The evil empire begins with the public school, striking directly at the heart and future of an idyllic community, and as the invasion expands throughout the town there is no resistance at all, only death and confused flight. The American people are represented as helpless children because they have never given thought to self-defense. Near the end of the opening sequence, a shot of a destroyed truck with an anti-gun control bumper sticker, "You can have my gun when you pry it from my cold dead fingers," pans down to the left and reveals just that scene—a Russian officer removing a pistol from the truck driver's dead hand. The NRA is prepared, but because they have become marginalized through oppressive gun control laws, there are simply not enough armed citizens to mount anything like a meaningful resistance. In terms of U.S. identity, *Red Dawn* argues that American pacifism and its generally dove-like demeanor has worked to silence the hawkish minority, leaving everyone wide open to attack from the Reds.

The third scene of this critique occurs near the end of the film. The Wolverines ambush a Soviet patrol that has come up into the mountains to hunt for them. The surprising thing is that the patrol finds them, in all of that mountain vastness, very quickly. The Wolverines win the heated battle with difficulty and capture a Russian soldier. As they attempt to question him, it turns out the patrol had been using a radio receiver that was homing in on a transmitter swallowed by Daryl, the student body president. He confesses that he has gone to town to see his father, the



mayor, who promptly turned him in to the KGB in hopes of stopping both the Wolverine attacks and the Soviet reprisals that invariably followed. They decide to execute both Daryl and the soldier, but there is disagreement as Jed attempts to assemble a firing squad to shoot them.

- Danny: This isn't happening, this isn't happening. Jed let 'em go!
- Jed: Shut up Danny!
- Danny: He was one of us!
- Jed: Shut up!
- Robert: He told them where we were!
- Jed: He did, now get your rifles.
- Matt: NO!
- Jed: What did you say?
- Matt: I said no, we're not doing it!
- Soldier: (to Daryl) Say to me that you are my friend, so I will not die alone.
- Matt: What's the difference Jed, huh?
- Robert: I'll do it.
- Matt: Shut up Robert. Tell me what's the difference between us and them?
- Jed: (pause) Because... WE LIVE HERE! (pulls pistol)
- AAAR! (shoots soldier)
- Daryl: Don't shoot, don't shoot. Don't shoot me Jed.
- Jed: AAAH! (pause, Jed aims but cannot shoot)
- Robert: (stands silently, then surprises everyone by quickly killing Daryl with a machine gun burst)

This exchange sums up the change in identity that the Wolverines have undergone. They began as naive children like the rest of the town, and now they have become brutal killers, just like their enemies. They have even started to look like their enemies. This scene is set in a broad mountain field covered in snow, and the Wolverines have scavenged the white enemy uniforms to help themselves blend into it. When Robert executes Daryl, he does not die right away. Instead, Daryl stumbles up against Robert for a final embrace before he slides to the ground, leaving a smear of bright red blood down Robert's white Soviet snow-gear. Robert's pure innocence has been stained—he has become a ruthless killer who has just spilled American blood onto the fresh white snow.

The answer to Matt's question about the difference between Us and Them is simple and telling—there is none. Jed's passionate response, "Because... WE LIVE HERE!" goes to the heart of American identity. The difference is not democracy, or capitalism, or religion, it is geographic

occupation. Historically speaking, the reason America never gets invaded is that it is a relatively young, relatively distant, country that was itself founded by invaders. In the final analysis, the Europeans that took North America from the Native Americans are really no different than the invading Communists who have come to take the rich farmland from the weak Americans. An identity based on geographic occupation is highly susceptible to paranoia—it requires a strong defense of one's "home" turf, because without it, you are nothing.

As a final point about *Red Dawn*, note the instrument of the Wolverine's betrayal, the town mayor. He symbolizes all of the soft politicians who would rather see peace than justice or freedom. He is so decadent that he would betray his own son, the only symbol of freedom that this town has, in the interest of peace and safety. He, and by extension all politicians, are cast as collaborators who prefer quiet over liberty; the country is run by bureaucrats rather than patriots.

#### *Invasion U.S.A.*

*Invasion U.S.A.* was not as successful as *Red Dawn*, but it was never intended to be. Chuck Norris began his B movie career by capitalizing on his martial arts skills. After winning several consecutive World Karate championships in the late '60s, Norris broke into movie work via a fight scene in the Bruce Lee classic *Return of the Dragon* (1972), and in 1977 he began starring in his own films including *Breaker! Breaker!*, *Good Guys Wear Black*, *Forced Vengeance*, *Missing in Action*, and *Code of Silence*. With his career growing rapidly, Norris found that the karate roles were limiting his audience, so he began to cultivate other action-hero personae, like the vengeful soldier in his *Missing in Action* films or the ultra-tough cop in *Code of Silence*. This strategy succeeded, and by 1985's *Invasion U.S.A.* Norris was earning nearly \$2 million per film (Hinson 1985).

*Invasion U.S.A.* was written by Chuck's brother Aaron in collaboration with James Bruner. Chuck himself worked with Bruner to develop the story into a screenplay, and for a director he chose Joseph Zito, who had also worked on *Missing in Action* and *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter*. Cannon Group studios were behind this project, allocating a large (for Chuck) budget of \$12 million. Box office response was "average or lower" (Memorex 1994), which is a very good showing for a B movie. Critics generally panned the film for its illogical plot, wooden acting, and senseless violence (*Variety*; Hiltbrand).

The story centers on Matt Hunter, a former government agent who has retired to the Florida Everglades. Mikhail Rostov, a Russian hard-

liner who Hunter has fought before, lands an invasion force comprised of terrorists and mercenaries and begins to destroy hundreds of minor domestic targets (malls, residential subdivisions, churches, etc.) in an attempt to overthrow the government by creating panic and distrust. When Rostov, who is haunted by memories of his last encounter with Hunter, learns that his personal enemy is in the area, he leads one of his invasion squads to kill Hunter at his isolated home in the Everglades. He fails, and Rostov's destruction of his home inspires Hunter to come out of retirement and stop the invasion. When Hunter finally catches up with Rostov, he foils much mayhem and kills many invaders but he cannot reach Rostov himself. To draw him out, Hunter pretends to get arrested for vigilantism and taunts Rostov during the televised coverage of his arraignment. Rostov leaps at the chance to destroy his enemy and diverts his entire invasion force to the building where Hunter is being held. The soldiers charge inside, but Hunter is free and the National Guard has surrounded the building. The Guard proceeds to massacre the invasion force, and Hunter personally kills Rostov.

*Invasion U.S.A.*'s setting and plot revolve around the same basic theme as *Red Dawn*, but this film presents a slightly different view of national identity. In terms of plot, where *Red Dawn* depicted innocents taken unaware with a small resistance group attempting to rescue their community, *Invasion U.S.A.* gives us both innocents and decadents (drug addicts, whores, gang members, in addition to respectable citizens) taken unaware, with ultimate rescue coming from the government. In terms of setting, Norris' film occurs in and around Miami at Christmas-time. The Russian violation of the Christmas holiday (which passes unacknowledged in *Red Dawn*) lends a dimension of outrage to the plot, but the crowded action and muggy heat of the city are miles removed from Calumet's cold white purity. Rostov makes his view of American helplessness clear as he eats a pre-invasion meal with Nikko at an outdoor restaurant surrounded by tourists and beach bunnies. "Jingle Bells" plays in the background while he tells his second in command

Tonight we make history, Nikko. America has not been invaded by a foreign enemy in nearly two-hundred years. Look at them Nikko; soft, spineless decadence, they don't even understand the nature of their own freedom, or how we could use it against them. They are their own worst enemy, for they don't know.

Three scenes stand out as promoting this view of helpless Americans via setting and plot. The first two are consecutive, and they demonstrate

the weaknesses of the average citizen. Rostov's plan is to create chaos that will lead the people to distrust each other and the government, so he selects domestic rather than military targets. One of the first attacks is set in a suburban neighborhood at dusk. Rostov and Nikko pull up in a truck as a local family puts the finishing touches on their Christmas tree, children play catch in the street, and a young couple kisses in their car. This scene's hymn, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," turns ominous when Rostov, brandishing a bazooka, muses "They make it so easy, don't they Nikko?" and then proceeds to destroy six homes. The invaders drive away slowly as the shocked residents watch their little cul-de-sac burn. The next scene is set at a southern Miami community center, where the mostly Latin neighborhood is holding a holiday dance. When a police car pulls up, the revelers expect the usual confrontation with the local police force. Instead, it is two of Rostov's mercenaries disguised as police. They open fire on the crowd with shotguns and kill many, but they are sure to leave witnesses to spread hatred for the police. Sure enough, as soon as they leave and the people begin to weep and ask why this has happened, a real squad car pulls up. The remains of the crowd take up rocks and bottles and assault the well meaning police in a full scale riot.

These two settings, the cul-de-sac and the Miami community center, are powerful symbols of American domesticity. Together, they represent the range of U.S. mainstream culture, the white suburbs where the middle-class moved during the baby boom, and the minority communities that make up much of today's urban society. Where the suburbanites are simply stunned by the destruction of their homes (much like Calumet), the urban minorities are used to police violence and it only takes them a minute to recover and act on their rage. Of course, their retaliation has the precise effect that the invaders desire. Rostov plays on existing race-tension in his attempt to divide and conquer. In this scene, American diversity is depicted as a major weakness. Later in the film, as the government catches on, a helpless FBI agent laments Rostov's strategy in a heavy-handed attempt to sum up the screen action "They're turning people against each other, and even worse, against authority."

Unlike *Red Dawn*'s depressing plot, where the heroes die and the war is won off-screen, *Invasion U.S.A.* crushes the invasion in an explosive final battle that comprises the last fifteen minutes of the film. The setting for this scene is downtown Atlanta, where the Southeastern Military Assistance Headquarters has been established to help control terrorism and domestic unrest in the area. It is also where Hunter is reported to be imprisoned for his vigilante crimes. Rostov believes that if he can kill



Hunter and topple the regional government in one strike, then the rest of the country will soon follow. The invaders steal armored trucks, crash through token resistance, and quickly take the empty headquarters. When they realize it is a trap, most return to the outside where the National Guard is waiting to open fire. The ensuing exchange is an urban battle more intense than any tiny Wolverine raid; this is a pitched battle between two well armed forces, and soldiers with machine guns, rockets, and tanks kill dozens of men before the few remaining terrorists surrender. The Guard cheers, but inside Hunter is still stalking Rostov. In their final confrontation, Hunter surprises him from behind, and as Rostov turns to shoot Hunter obliterates him with a rocket launcher shot from the hip. After the explosion clears, the final shot of the film shows Hunter satisfied with a job well done.

The march (drive) to Atlanta works to establish the scale of the invasion. Even though the soldiers have landed in Florida, the havoc they are wreaking is spreading across the entire country. One television report tells us that the stock market is crashing and that inter-gang warfare is rampant. While this setting is significant, it is the plot that does most in this scene. This is the climax, where protagonist and antagonist finally meet face to face. The major contrast with *Red Dawn* here is not only that the enemy is destroyed, but that they are destroyed by the government. Hunter is not a civilian fighting back against an occupying army, he is a government agent who has come out retirement to fight an enemy he should have been allowed to kill long ago. Hunter makes it clear that he "works alone," but his resistance is ineffective against such a large force, "for every one I stop one hundred succeed," so the loner ends up working with the authorities. The government that prevented him from assassinating Rostov earlier has now realized its error, and has devoted the powerful resources of the National Guard to Hunter's plan. Their success is final and definite. The invading army has been defeated and Rostov has been blown to bits.

Another interesting feature of the plot is that there is no denouement. At the beginning of the film, we learn that Rostov is not working in complete isolation from the Soviet government through vague intimations that "They" will not be pleased by Rostov's obsession with Hunter. If this prospect were taken seriously, resolution of numerous foreign policy repercussions would be needed, but this eventuality is safely ignored because the conflict in *Invasion U.S.A.* is not the Soviet Union vs. the U.S., it is Rostov vs. Hunter. By personalizing the Cold War conflict, this film enables a final resolution (complete destruction of the enemy) that is simply not possible at the national level due to the

nuclear standoff. Hunter's triumph is thus infinitely more satisfying because there are no weighty issues, such as nuclear winter or ideological rectitude, there is only the standard late Cold War enemy (although this one does have a small army) who is irrationally bent on destabilizing the international power balance. Killing him solves the problem and returns us to our familiar standoff.

#### CONCLUSION

The U.S. invasion sub-genre of cold war film is rare, but it does say quite a bit about American identity through the Reagan years. Overall, we are presented with a vision of the American public as complacent, weak, and unprepared. The basic lesson the viewer is to take away from both *Red Dawn* and *Invasion U.S.A.* is that Americans do not appreciate the freedoms they have because they have not given thought to how to defend them against Communist aggression.

Setting in these two films works to convey the idea that invasion is a complete violation of hearth and home. *Red Dawn's* small town and snow swept mountains are not your typical battlefield—they represent the pure heart of the country and show how easily it can be taken. Non-military targets are also prevalent in *Invasion U.S.A.*, where the invaders purposefully set out to destroy churches, malls, and residential communities.

The way the invaders are ultimately repelled in these two plots is very different. Neither presents us with a mass mobilization of citizens, as in the Revolutionary war. Instead, *Red Dawn* establishes that the peace-loving government cannot be trusted and places its hopes of liberation on a small group of guerilla youths. In contrast, *Invasion U.S.A.* gives us a tough government agent who begins by working alone but eventually collaborates with state officials to completely destroy the invading army.

To conclude, America saw a brief resurgence in the U.S. invasion sub-genre after these two films were released. On television, Americans were treated to a vision of the U.S. under communist rule with ABC's *Amerika* and *Topeka Kansas-USSR*. The invasion scenario clearly spoke to Reagan's America, but as the Reagan administration ended and the Berlin wall came down, theatrical depictions of external threats shifted away from invaders and back toward the international madmen of the 1970s—witness the continued popularity of the James Bond series. War films also returned to the Viet Nam model, where war itself is depicted as the ultimate evil.

Overall, these films present a sort of conservative revenge on the liberal '60s and '70s. From today's perspective, they are somewhat quaint reminders of the Cold War gone by, but it is important to remember that entire generations of Americans were socialized within this atmosphere of militant fear. Our twenty-first century fears are not broad and international like the Cold War's nuclear standoff, they are the much more local and personal threat of terrorist attacks. In this sense the U.S. invasion films of the '80s help explain current American responses to terrorism. Bronson's *Invasion U.S.A.* is prophetic in its focus on terrorist attacks aimed at ordinary citizens. And with *Red Dawn*, it is impossible to trace direct causality to any single film, but domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh did cite this film as a primary inspiration for the Oklahoma City bombing (Bart 1997; Kinney 1997). When national identity is a function of geographic location and that territory has never required defense, terrorist attacks—the first domestic violations in centuries—are felt on a personal and visceral level. With this primal sort of threat, a previously inconceivable violation of and attack on home-turf, any leader proposing a strategy resembling intellectual and calculated Cold War era diplomacy or even counter-terrorist espionage is seen as weak. Violations of this order, invasions of the U.S.A. however limited, are interpreted as fundamental threats requiring large-scale military operations with an international scope, a War on Terror.

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