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Rhetoric of the Cold War

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Red Dawn in the Context of the Cold War

Red Dawn, released in 1984, is a film that follows a group of football star teenagers as their Colorado town is invaded by Soviet, Cuban, and Nicaraguan forces (IMDB 1984). The film was directed by John Milius, who also helped co-write the script (Goodykoontz). Red Dawn was later remade in 2009 by director Dan Bradley, but was not released until 2012 (IMDB 2012). The 2012 remake of Red Dawn follows a group of friends, led by the captain of the football team, Matt, and his older brother, Jed, as Korean forces invade their Washington state town (Red Dawn 2012). Though the remake closely follows the events of the original, the political climate changed drastically between 1984 and 2012. In 1984, fears from the Cold War were still instilled in the American people. Thus, the original film serves as propaganda, aiming to instill a sense of pride in our foreign policy. The remake is less clear about it’s political message, but more invested in economic benefits of movie-making. Instead of a work to frame the antagonists, it is more of a work to instill patriotism in the American people. In my following work, I aim to examine the political and overarching goals of both the 1984 Red Dawn and it’s 2012 remake. In the 1984 film, the United States stands alone in a World War III against the communists (Red Dawn 1984). Because of the rapidly rising tensions in the 1980’s with regards to the Cold War, this film aims to directly criticize the communist people and frame them as antagonists. The Cold War is often marked by ambiguity in contrast with WWII, which was so black and white with regards to who was in the wrong (Nazi Germany) and who was in the right (those who fought the Nazis). Red Dawn aims to eradicate ambiguity surrounding the situation and frame it in more of a black and white, good vs. evil manner. In the first fifteen minutes of the film, we are presented with an American lying dead on the ground with a gun next to him, as the camera pans up to a bumper sticker that reads “they can have my gun when they pry it out of my cold, dead fingers” (Red Dawn 1984). The symbolism of this is explicit. We see a demonstration of American rights – the second amendment, right to bear arms, and we see this right violated by the invaders. This right is violated in the most extreme way possible – through death. Milius is clearly beginning to construct a theme of violation in the film. The Soviets aren’t just attacking in the world of politics, but on the individual level regarding individual rights. This is meant to hit home with the viewer, conjuring up feelings of resentment towards the possibility of the political climate affecting them personally. In the 1980’s tensions between the U.S. and the Soviets were growing. Ronald Reagan famously called the Soviet Union an “evil empire” on March 8th, 1983 (Voices of Democracy). Also in 1983, Reagan implemented the Strategic Defense Initiative in order to protect the nation from missile attacks (The Cold War Museum). While previous presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter governed foreign policy with détente, or a more peaceful coexistence, Reagan took a different approach (Presidential Leadership in the Cold War). Reagan’s aggressive stance created a context in which war felt imminent to the American people. This is reflected in Red Dawn’s opening scene as paratroopers fall from the sky and begin to shoot without hesitation. Milius demonstrates a savage war style – we see no prisoners taken in the first minutes of the film, only civilians gunned down. This demonstration of savagery goes to reinforce Reagan’s imagery of an “evil empire.” The war style in the movie seems less about politics and more about killing Americans for sport. The audience of Red Dawn is the American people, but more specifically the American people who are undecided about how to feel about our foreign policy. Red Dawn aims to eliminate the feeling of guilt in Americans who are on the fence and possibly worried about how our warfare affects the people of the Soviet Union and other communist territories. Milius appeals to this audience through the representation of the enemy as savage. Robert L. Ivie says in an article, “a people strongly committed to the ideal of peace, but simultaneously faced with the reality of war, must believe that the fault for any such disruption of their ideal lies with others” (Engels). He then goes on to explain victimage rhetoric, where a scapegoat is chosen as an antagonizing force. We can apply American politics at the time to this statement through Reagan’s mantra “Peace Through Strength,” thus conveying the idea that in order to establish peace, we must face the reality of war (Knight). Red Dawn uses victimage rhetoric, exemplifying the Soviets, Cubans, and Nicaraguans as a scapegoat for the U.S. Citizens to blame for the cause of brutal war and lack of peace.

Another audience of the film is the American youth. The film opens with Soviet paratroopers landing in a schoolyard and shooting down the teacher (Red Dawn). A group of football players then flees to the woods and tries to figure out what to do next. They end up forming together as successful guerrilla warriors named the “Wolverines” after their school mascot. This offers the idea that, though most of these high school-aged kids weren’t old enough to vote, politics mattered to them. This was something that could change their lives in the blink of an eye. Possibly, if they chose to be communist sympathizers, it could kill them and the ones they loved. The film appealed to these youthful audiences because the end of the Cold War, frankly, was not in sight. Red Dawn aimed to root anti-communist sentiments in the next generation because they were the next generation of voters and politicians. This propaganda aimed to ensure another generation of strong anti-communists in case the Cold War lasted and, worst case scenario, WWIII broke out. One exigence of this film is the fear of the Soviets. The film aims to show Americans that instead of all being blown to pieces, they have a choice to fight back. That is just what this group of boys does – they call themselves “the Wolverines” and bond together to fight (Red Dawn). This is the more explicit exigency. On a more subconscious level, the film is propaganda. The exigence is a wavering American support of their government. Red Dawn addresses this exigence by addressing the audience I described above – those on the fence. This film aims to instill fear that if you weren’t on board with the Reagan administration and all of the heavy-handed anti-communist policy, you could end up in a WWIII situation and fear your life. For constraints, the movie is hardly believable. The idea that a group of high school students can successfully evade trained Soviet troops and become experts in guerrilla warfare is a bit of a stretch (Red Dawn 1984). The film provides no evidence that the boys had any previous experience with warfare before, and the fact that they can outsmart troops is a bit unbelievable (Red Dawn 1984). In a few instances, the invaders have an opportunity to shoot and kill the boys, but for some reason do not. Also, an untrained Wolverine who has never shot a bow-and-arrow before somehow manages to shoot a foreign solider perfectly in the back on the first try (Red Dawn 1984). The kids also somehow manage to throw grenades perfectly into foreign tanks. At one instance a Wolverine manages to shoot a rocket directly inside of a helicopter at the last possible moment, saving his friends. All of these strides of luck are extremely implausible, especially for a group of boys who have never practiced anything relatively warlike before. Another instance of extreme coincidental luck is the fact that Matt and Jed’s parents just-so-happen to own a sporting goods store, where they can load up on sleeping bags, guns, equipment, and food. It is also often never explained how they acquire guerrilla warfare apparel throughout the film. Red Dawn’s remake was filmed in 2009 and directed by Dan Bradley – his first work as director (Dargis). Yet, Red Dawn not released until November of 2012 (IMDB 2012). This was due to MGM’s realization that a good amount of film revenue is created via Chinese audiences – an issue, because the original invaders in the remake were Chinese (Lee). The film was edited over the next two years to change the villains from Chinese to Korean. Mandarin was dubbed to Korean, and flags and signs were changed from PRC to DPRK (Lee). This was an easier task at hand than would have been in the original movie, due to the fact that we see much less of Captain Cho than we did of Cuban Col. Ernesto Bella. This switching of the enemy was something that could not have been done in the original in order to pack the same punch in the political climate of the time. Since the remake of Red Dawn was less about the surrounding political events of the time, it more encompasses an idea about American patriotism in a general sense. While 1984’s Red Dawn was about fighting against the Soviets, 2012’s Red Dawn is about fighting for the United States. Through this switch of the enemy from Chinese to Korean, we can see that the audience is not a political one – it is an economic one. The audience of the 2012 Red Dawn is anyone in good economic standing. The movie creators wanted viewers to pay for the movie, not learn from it. The movie was made more for money than for a platform to project a political view. Because China has money, the movie was changed. This is not a scenario that the 1984 Red Dawn would run into, because the 1984 Red Dawn was made with the political climate in mind. 2012’s was made with economics in mind. Red Dawn’s 2012 remake made $48,164,150 in the worldwide box office (The Numbers). The audience, of course to some extent, is also the American people. The movie doesn’t shy away from patriotism, with Matt and Jeb driving a Dodge Ram, their father being a cop, and Jeb being a Marine. The Wolverines even at some points chant “USA! USA! USA!.” It doesn’t get more patriotic than that. But this sense of patriotism seems to be a bit lost in comparison to the original Red Dawn. Once the movie is over, the American audience is left with a sense of patriotism, but for what purpose? After watching the original Red Dawn, this patriotism would linger on to the ballots and newspapers and talk at school. But after watching the remake of Red Dawn, there seems to be nowhere to project this patriotism onto. This is because the movie was made for economics, not for politics. It was not made with a political climate in mind, so the patriotism doesn’t have quite a purpose for the viewer. The exigence, though we can understand that there is not a very pressing one due to the economic motivations of the remake, could simply be wavering patriotism. Jeb states “for them, this is just some place, but for us this is home” (Red Dawn 2012). He also contrasts it with fighting in Iraq, describing what they’re doing as “fighting in your own backyard…fighting for your family” (Red Dawn 2012). These patriotic quotes are less about fighting against the opponent and more about fighting for home. Thus, the movie does not aim to instill hate for an enemy like the original does. Instead, it aims to instill a sense of pride for America in the average American. Red Dawn’s 2012 remake aims more to dehumanize the opponent – they are less of a body of people and more of an “other.” This was mentioned slightly earlier – we see much less of Captain Cho than we did of Col. Ernesto Bella in the original. This is because Bradley is not trying to establish who the enemy is, he is simply establishing that they are an enemy. There are a few shots of red communist propaganda with the word “Wolverines” spray painted over them, symbolically distinguishing a dominance over a communist enemy. Red Dawn’s 2012 pays tribute to the original with a very similar intro – Korean paratroopers dropping in by air. It also follows suit with the same unbelievability as the first movie. First of all, North Korea could not compare to the United States in terms of military strength. The idea that they could overpower the United States is absurd. North Korea’s defense budget is $7.5 billion while the United States’ is $581 billion (World Military Strengths). With this stark of a difference, North Korea would never be able to even get remotely close to occupying the United States in the way that it does in the film. Washington, where the movie takes place, is an open carry state. This means that civilians can carry legal firearms in holsters as long as they aren’t in government or school zones (Spirit of the Thing). The idea that nobody would be shooting back at the Koreans immediately is improbable, especially if they are invading their hometown. Matt and Jeb’s family conveniently owns a cabin in the woods, which the American-hearted, red-white-and-blue-bleeding boys drive off to in their Dodge Ram in true patriotic fashion. Very conveniently, Matty’s older brother Jed, is on leave from the Marines and with them to help. One of the girls with them just so happens to know how to properly stitch a stab wound. Also, Matt and Jed’s father is a cop. In one of the final battle scenes, Jed is unarmed and hurt, lying on the ground of the Korean’s pop-up headquarters, about to be shot by a Korean. Conveniently, this is the ex-police station, and Jed opens a super-secret password-protected box placed under the desk that he is lying next to. The improbability of this is almost laughable. Thus, the constraint of 2012’s Red Dawn is the exact same as 1984’s Red Dawn – how absolutely unbelievable it is.

The seriousness of the political time changed from 1984 to 2012. In 1984, the American public was ridden with fear and movies like Red Dawn were serious demonstrations of what could possibly happen. The integrity of this was lost in the remake. This can be demonstrated by contrasting the scene in which one of the boys drinks the blood of the deer he kills. In the 1984 version, three boys share an intense moment as one of the boys, Robert, drinks the blood of the deer, saying “it’s not that bad” as he is symbolically changed into a hunter. There is a sense of comradery, as both of the other boys have followed this tradition. In the 2012 remake, Matt and Jeb ask the boy, “how does it taste?” He replies, “well don’t you know?” Matt and Jeb immediately start laughing and say “we never drank that shit!” A moment that was once serious and symbolic was transformed in the 2012 remake to a prank. This is representative of the entire movie. What was once serious is remade into something that is not so. Another factor that compromised the integrity of the original movie is the implementation of a love story. If there is one thing that is prominent in modern media – sex sells. It’s no wonder that in this economically-driven remake, Matt has an exceptionally beautiful girlfriend, Erica. She is taken prisoner by the Koreans and during a mission, Matt strays from the group, derailing their plan (and killing one of his friends in the process) to rescue Erica. Erica adds no dimension to the movie – she does not have any exceptional talents or offer comedic relief to the audience. She is simply a blonde, beautiful prop to either capture the attention of young boys who are attracted to her or girls who love the idea of being rescued. She is a “damsel in distress” ploy in order to cater to more audiences, thus making more money. There is also a romantic fling between Tony and Jeb. Though they never actually kiss in the movie, it is made aware to the audience that they mutually have feelings for each other and is brought up multiple times throughout the film. The original 1984 Red Dawn has no romantic storylines in it, except for a mild crush between two characters that barely plays itself out. One of the things that Red Dawn’s remake has on it’s side is the technology. Since the film was made in 2012, the special effects are much better as well as sound and film quality. It does a good job of capturing the audiences attention, even if that attention is diverted to how poor the plot is. The actors are good looking, there is some good music used (some Creedence Clearwater Revival, in all of its Americana glory), and the fight scenes are much more action-packed. When marketing to millenials, it is important that a movie is able to sustain attention for the duration of it. Our instant gratification driven world has hindered our ability to sit down and watch a movie – a fact that, unfortunately, was demonstrated to me as I tried not to doze off during the original. The flashy nature of 2012’s Red Dawn keeps the audience watching, even if that means cheap romance ploys and more gunfire. Overall, 1984’s Red Dawn aims to create a stark contrast of good vs. evil in the American people. By using a group of high school football players in a small Colorado town, the writers played on a stereotypical America. It framed them as fully “good” against an outside force of Soviet “evil.” It reached out to the American people who were on the fence about their views and shaped political views of young Americans. 1984’s Red Dawn truly demonstrated the value of “peace through strength” in the Reagan era. This intense political sentiment was lost in the 2012 remake. Red Dawn’s remake was compromised with economics in mind. It used cheap ploys to get viewers, yet compromised the integrity of the movie. It’s message went from a pure form of propaganda by those who truly believed in their views, to a simple “anti-other” and “pro-America” movie.

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