

# Chinese Invasion: 'Red Dawn' Remake Has Cultural Critics Up in Arms

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This November, MGM is releasing a remake of Red Dawn, the violent 1984 Soviet invasion flick that starred Patrick Swayze and C. Thomas Howell. Although the film won't be out for months, it has already drawn attacks from critics claiming that its depiction of Chinese attackers is racist and demeaning.

On the surface, the new Red Dawn is a close remake of the original, with Chinese and Russian soldiers standing in for the original Soviet and Cuban villains. The characters' names are the same and, for the most part, so are their biographies. The main difference lies with Jed Eckert, the Patrick Swayze character. This time around, he's an Afghanistan war veteran who goes from fighting an insurgency to leading one.

## Updating a 1980s Worldview

For Red Dawn's writers, one major speed bump was the difficulty of updating a mid-1980s worldview for 21st-century movie screens. When the original film came out, many Americans viewed the Soviet Union as a faceless, threatening mass of villainy that was locked in mortal combat with the U.S. This played out in the storytelling: When the invaders first appeared, they were parachuting into a small Colorado town and randomly killing teachers and students. The film gave no context for the arrival of the paratroopers — then again, none was needed. These were, after all, Soviets and Cubans, the official bogeymen of Reagan-era America. As in a nightmare, their arrival was surprising, but hardly needed explanation.

In the past 25 years, the geopolitical environment has irreversibly changed. Today's Russia is hardly ready — or inclined — to attack the U.S., and a Chinese invasion is equally unlikely. Yet an action flick requires a villain, and China's strong economy and growing militarism make it the best candidate. Still it's a stretch, and in order to give the story a veneer of plausibility, Red Dawn's writers had to include a lot more context. Reviewing the 2010 Red Dawn script, Latino Review.Com noted that the invasion is rooted in a series of fatal — and highly unlikely — diplomatic missteps.

## Destabilizing Relations With Two World Powers

Set against the backdrop of contemporary politics, the film begins with an American withdrawal from Iraq. The President decides to redeploy troops to Taiwan, where escalating Chinese militarism is threatening America's ally. At the same time, he also welcomes the former Soviet republic of Georgia into NATO, unleashing Russian worries that America is spreading its sphere of influence deep into Eastern Europe. Having destabilized relations with two of the world's largest powers, the President then claims that the U.S. is only partly

to blame for a global economic meltdown, further escalating tensions with China and ultimately leading to the invasion of the Pacific Northwest.

While the scenario is far-fetched, China's occupation of America carries several elements that seem oddly plausible [?!]. Soon after their arrival, the Chinese invaders put up dozens of inspirational posters. One shows a red mallet smashing the U.S. Capitol under the title "Defeating Your Enemy." Another shows a selection of doughnuts, proclaiming "Obscene Choice. A Weapon of Mass Distraction." Above all, the theme of the invasion seems to be that America's economic woes have led to its overthrow and that the Chinese invaders will help the country to recover its economic footing. One poster, for example, depicts a red-clad worker beating a dollar sign under the slogan "Repairing Your Economy."

### Missed Opportunity for Main Street Revenge

On a side note, the filmmakers' decision to go with the violent invasion narrative seems like a missed opportunity. Given middle America's deep well of anger with both Wall Street and Washington, it isn't that hard to imagine a scenario in which some people on "Main Street" would embrace the avenging hand of a Chinese force. The film's marketing propaganda, which suggests austerity combined with corporate vengeance, hints at a movie that could have been more interesting and topical than the standard reboot.

Red Dawn's producers added an interesting level of irony to the movie with their choice of location. While the story is set in Spokane, tax incentives made it cheaper to film in the Detroit area. Last autumn, while principal filming was taking place in Michigan, General Motors was in talks to sell Hummer to a Chinese company. In a shot at topicality and verisimilitude, the production designers decided to depict the Chinese invaders arriving in a fleet of Hummers. Unfortunately for Red Dawn's filmmakers, the sale fell through, transforming what would have been a chilling detail into a historical curiosity.

### Already Under Fire in China

In China, the Red Dawn remake has already come under fire. In the past week Beijing's largest paper, The Global Times, ran two editorials on the film, proclaiming "U.S. reshoots Cold War movie to demonize China" and "American movie plants hostile seeds against China." Then again, given that China only allows the importation of 20 foreign films per year, chances are that the film's producers weren't counting on a vast Chinese audience.

The U.S., however, is another matter, and the cultural battle over Red Dawn is also heating up on this side of the Pacific. In a recent article, New York area website The Awl took aim at the reboot, calling it "probably the most unnecessary, irresponsible, Sinophobic film in America's history," and attacking it for everything from its inclusion of a Toby Keith song to its supposed pandering to "survivalist militia types." Along the way, the site also managed to link the remake to the RAND Corporation, a military strategy and public policy think tank, as well as every piece of anti-Asian propaganda from the last century.

For contemporary audiences, the original Red Dawn is a time capsule, representing the (highly dated) fears, desires, and prejudices of an America that was recovering from a recession while locked in battle with an ideological foe. The reboot, while painfully out of touch with the political and military realities of the current day, attempts to tap into the very real economic insecurities of a populace that feels the country is out of control. In this context, the Chinese invaders, rather than being an accurate depiction of our economic

competitors, are more likely a reflection of America's biggest concerns about its own future. This fall, we'll see if the film's villains touch a nerve.

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