



Cold War Experience

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The Movie Club

Our look back at the Cold War big screen classics

A heavy-handed message of patriotism in 'Big Jim McLain'

"Big Jim McLain" (1952)

Starring: John Wayne, James Arness

By *Emily Soares*

Special to CNN Interactive

While many of the Cold War films of the '50s found all kinds of ways to dress up their themes, from alien invasions to dysfunctional families, "Big Jim McLain" (1952) is one picture that cuts to the chase. John Wayne and James Arness (both topping out in the 6' 4" range) are a towering team of HUAC agents on assignment. The location is Hawaii, the target is the Honolulu cell of the Communist party and the mission is called -- what else? -- Operation Pineapple.

Hollywood jumped into the HUAC fray years before

"Big Jim McLain" made its debut, but few

commercial films stated their claims with such shameless relish. That Wayne, whose Wayne-Fellows company produced the film, was instrumental in the project's treatment of the Red menace is no surprise. Three years earlier, in 1949, he was elected president of the Motion Picture Association for the Preservation of American Ideals, a group that not only cooperated freely with the HUAC, but is believed to have initiated the relationship.

Between 1947 and 1954, the major studios released more than 50 anti-Communist films. "They were part of Hollywood's ritual of atonement and appeasement," said critic Nora Sayre in her book "Running Time: Films of the Cold War," "and were aimed at an uninformed audience in a decade when almost anything that middle America feared could be related to Communism."



FROM WARNER BROTHERS
Schemers

Honolulu's head Communist, Sturak (Alan Napier), with double agent (Robert Keys), explains plan to take over the Island



FROM WARNER BROTHERS
*Don't Sully the
Duds*

Country club poser/Party member (Peter Whitney) starts trouble with McLain (John Wayne)

The film opens with a kind of folk-gothic prologue. Harry Morgan, with strident patriotism, quotes from "The Devil and Daniel Webster" as lightning strikes on a lonely hillside. And if, he says, you're standing on old Dan'll's grave and he asks you "Neighbor, how stands the Union?" you had better have a positive answer.

As expected, the answer in "Big Jim McLain" is that the Union is not standing as "oak-bottomed and copper-sheathed" as she once did. But the menace she faces appears to be less the threat of Communists, who are shown here as a motley crew

of thugs and country club rejects bent on knocking each other off, than of those pesky Constitutional protections that keep them out of jail. The film begins and ends with Wayne, as Jim McLain, watching HUAC hearings with silent rage as suspected Communists go free by claiming the Fifth Amendment -- a freedom, he explains, they are actually seeking to destroy.

Wayne is joined in his frustration by partner Mal Baxter, Arness: "My partner ... hates these people," Wayne's voiceover explains. "They shot at him in Korea." So the two head off to the Islands with the hope that this time round, they'll get enough evidence to put some Communists -- this bunch involved in a scheme to disrupt shipping during the Korean War -- away for a good, long time.

Alan Napier is Sturak, their ringleader, a man lacking both conscience and humor (like all true Communists) who can hardly wait to liquidate the expendable members of the cell -- practically all of them. Napier went on to worldwide fame in a far less sinister role, that of Alfred the butler in the "Batman" series.

And then there's the love interest, Nancy (Nancy Olson). Representing the kinder, gentler side of anti-Communism (a woman's prerogative), Nancy provides the perfect setup for some of "McLain"'s most pointed dialogue. As she ponders the psychological profile that could lead a person to the "cult" of Communism, Big Jim tells her the "why" is not important:

"I've heard all the jive. This one's a Commie 'cause Mama wouldn't tuck him in at night. That one, 'cause girls wouldn't welcome him with open arms. The 'what' I do know. It's like when I was in uniform. I shot at the guy on the other side of the



FROM WARNER BROTHERS
*Sun, Surf and
Sanctity*

Nancy (Nancy Olson) and Big Jim (John Wayne) take a break from Commie-stalking for some Island fun

perimeter 'cause he was the enemy."

Critical response to the film was divided by coast. Eastern reviewers found it oversimplified and irresponsible. One, according to Randy Roberts and James S. Olsen in their book "John Wayne: American," wondered "how many loyal Americans may actually have converted to communism out of embarrassment that their country could produce" such films as "Big Jim McLain."

On the West Coast, however, the film was lavished with praise by film industry publications. Audiences seemed to agree, perhaps enthralled enough with Wayne's presence to overlook the film's sketchy storyline and the lead weight of its politics. "Big Jim McLain" became the most successful film of its anti-Communist genre, grossing \$3 million.

As the film winds up, the Commies have once again gotten off on the Fifth, a privilege, McLain laments, intended for "honest, decent citizens." Still, he is optimistic about the future, so long as there are big ships, soldiers and girls like Nancy.


That Wayne's character, Jim McLain, shared initials with Sen. Joseph McCarthy is considered no coincidence. Wayne has said he believed the film helped the election of the Senator for his second term in 1952. And though it's hard to believe that anyone would swallow the sentiment of a film like this one, laughable now in its heavy-handedness, it is chilling to consider how many lives were destroyed by the shrill propaganda of films like "Big Jim McLain," when Cold War hysteria suspended America's disbelief on and off the screen.


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