

# Movie Review - 'Hail, Caesar!' and the Red Menace

Written by W. Alejandro Sanchez

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W. ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ, MAR 23 2016

**Hail, Caesar!**  
**Feb. 2016**  
**Universal Pictures**

'Hail, Caesar!' is a 2016 comedy film by Joel and Ethan Coen which has enjoyed financial and critical success since its February 5 release. For IR scholars, the film showcases a tense period of U.S. history: the 1950s. This decade was marked by growing tensions and incidents as part of the Cold War, the fear of a Soviet takeover of the U.S. government and the rise of McCarthyism. In view of the tense relations between the U.S. and the Russian Federation today, which Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev recently described as a "new Cold War," 'Hail, Caesar!' becomes, unfortunately, very topical.

A brief synopsis of 'Hail, Caesar!' is necessary: The movie takes place in 1951, when a famous actor, Baird Whitlock (George Clooney), is kidnapped from a studio set in a fictitious Hollywood film company. Whitlock is taken to a beach house in Malibu, California, in which he meets his kidnapers, a group of screenwriters that call themselves The Future. They turn out to be a Communist faction who explain Whitlock their ideology in order to convince him to join them. At one point in the film, another actor, Burt Gurney (Channing Tatum), is revealed to also be a Communist. He and the other members of The Future row a boat a few miles off the coast of Malibu where they encounter a Soviet submarine. Gurney (along with his dog) boards it as he defects to the USSR. His Future comrades suffer a different fate as they are arrested by the police, who also free Whitlock.

### Red Hollywood

'Hail, Caesar!' provides a glimpse of what Hollywood was like in the 1950s. At the time, Washington feared that the Soviet Union was infiltrating all echelons of American society (i.e. the government, Hollywood, labor unions etc), with the goal of taking over the country. This paranoia prompted the rise of McCarthyism, named after U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy who was known for his extreme anti-Communist endeavors. Communist witch hunts took place during the 1950s as thousands of Americans, thought to be Communists, were investigated and sometimes even imprisoned. The House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which operated from 1938 to 1975, took a prominent role throughout this period.

The Coen Brothers address the Red Menace head on as Hollywood was a major target of Washington's surveillance operations. There was even a "Hollywood blacklist" – a name applied to the Hollywood workers (like screenwriters and producers) that the HUAC investigated because they were believed to be Communist spies or sympathizers who were implanting Communist ideologies in Hollywood productions. A *Slate.com* analysis of 'Hail, Caesar!' does a good job comparing some of the members of the fictitious Future to real life individuals: "the group leader, played by Max Baker, is named John Howard Hermann, after the Hollywood 10's John Howard Lawson, the leader of the Hollywood section of the Communist party during the early 1950s. Eagle-eyed viewers will also notice a dog named Engels, whose namesake is more obvious [as in Friedrich Engels]."

Another important issue worth discussing is the appearance of a Soviet submarine off the coast of California, well within U.S. territorial waters. I do not know of any submarines operating so close to the U.S. mainland during that

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decade, though there were incidents in which Soviet vessels entered the Western Hemisphere and came close to the U.S. Case in point: the Soviet vessels off the coast of Cuba during the missile crisis. Another memorable incident was the loss of K-219 in 1986. This was a Soviet submarine that suffered an explosion and sank in the North Atlantic close to Bermuda.

Even though 'Hail, Caesar!' is set in the early 1950s, not much seems to have changed in Washington-Moscow relations, given the renewed tensions between the two global powers. Currently there are no suspicions that Hollywood, broadly speaking, has been infiltrated by Russian sympathizers. Nevertheless, I will acknowledge that conservative commentators routinely label the entertainment industry as "the liberal left." Case in point, in his book *Primetime Propaganda* Ben Shapiro has accused Hollywood of trying to "shape America in their own leftist image." Moreover, there have been recent cases of alleged espionage. One memorable case was that of Anna Chapman, a Russian national who lived in New York and who was arrested, along with nine other individuals, in 2010 as they were suspected of working for the SVR, a Russian intelligence agency. She was sent back to Moscow that same year as part of a spy swap.

## The Soviet/Russian Navy

The possibility of a Russian submarine entering U.S. territorial waters nowadays, portrayed in "Hail, Caesar!" deserves a greater discussion. In recent years, the Russian Federation has sought to increase its military might, which includes opening new bases (like in the Russian Arctic) and manufacturing new vessels for its Navy. In fact, the Russian Navy's Pacific Fleet recently received a new submarine, the *Vladimir Monomakh*. Moreover, there have already been instances of Moscow displaying its renewed strength in the Western Hemisphere. In 2008, Russian warships visited the Caribbean, docking in Caracas, Venezuela, and carrying out exercises with the local Navy. More recently, in January 2015, the *Viktor Leonov*, a Russian intelligence vessel, docked in Havana, Cuba.

With that said, it is important to stress that there have been no, at least from what I can gather via open sources, incidents of Russian warships or submarines entering U.S. territorial waters, though it is true that Cuba is only 90 miles away from the Straits of Florida. Doing so would signify an escalation of tensions between Moscow and Washington, akin to if the U.S. opened a military base in Ukraine next to Crimea. Moreover, should a Russian submarine manage to reach Malibu, California, this would mean that it successfully evaded U.S. security systems (i.e. warships and Coast Guard vessels monitoring coastal waters, satellites, radars and intelligence operations). The implications of such an incident would prompt a major revision of the U.S. defense establishment.

Even though it is beyond the scope of this movie review, it is important to mention that in February, the Russian government filed a request to the U.S. to fly a surveillance plane over U.S. airspace as part of the 1992 Open Skies Treaty. The difference between this request and 'Hail, Caesar!' is that it is doubtful that Moscow requested Washington permission to pick up a defector via a submarine in California. Nevertheless, the point stands that nowadays there are (very limited) occasions in which the Russian military is allowed to enter the U.S.

## Final Thoughts

"Hail, Caesar!" has enjoyed success at the box office. The film has some entertaining comedic moments, however, its major contribution to the IR field is to remind us that the current tensions between the two global powers are nothing new. Accusations of Russian espionage have occurred for decades, though the 1950s paranoia of Hollywood implanting Communist ideas in films has morphed into the more traditional "learning state secrets" type of intelligence operations. Moreover, when Channing Tatum's character boarded a Soviet submarine off the Californian coast, while fun to watch, this can be utilized to discuss Soviet/Russian naval technology in the 1950s and today.

As Prime Minister Medvedev declared, we are witnessing the start of a new Cold War, and the events of six decades ago are being recreated, albeit slightly different, today.

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### **About the author:**

Alejandro Sanchez Nieto is a researcher who focuses on geopolitics, military and cyber security issues in the Western Hemisphere. He is a regular contributor for *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly*, the *Center for International Maritime Security*, *Blouin News*, and *Living in Peru*, among others. His analyses have appeared in numerous refereed journals including *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, *Defence Studies*, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *European Security*, *Perspectivas* and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. His Twitter is @W\_Alex\_Sanchez.