

Review of [Independence Day](#) Published in [Wall Street Journal](#), July 5, 1996. [[Original Location](#)]

Film

ETs Bomb U.S.; Travolta Turns Sweet

By JOE MORGENSTERN

As I watched the alien invaders in "**Independence Day**" zap the White House and pretty much everything else on the face of the earth, I tried my best to suspend disbelief, and succeeded in the wrong way. In a summer of aggressively dumb big movies, I do believe this one is the dumbest.

It made me reconsider something I'd once heard at a dinner party attended mostly by scientists. One of them was saying that if you wanted to make a case for extraterrestrials having visited this planet, all you had to do was point to Hungary, a small country that has produced an astonishing number of superintelligent physicists, mathematicians and other seminal thinkers, not to mention Nobel laureates. A spaceship, this man said, must have landed in Budapest. But what if he was wrong? What if it landed in Hollywood? What if aliens have already taken over the movie business and are dumbing it down as a first step in the stupefaction and destruction of humankind? This would certainly account for the trend toward blockbusters that leave us emotionally blocked and intellectually busted.

In particular it would explain the total absence of human resonance in "Independence Day." You keep wondering if this clunker was written by men or machines; the answer could be neither. An alien takeover would also explain the movie's otherwise inexplicable failures of imagination. For example: ETs have just arrived in a mother ship that weighs almost as much as our moon, and the skies are dark with three dozen alien destroyers, each 15-miles wide. So what happens next? Why, lots of car crashes. "There have been over 10,000 fender-benders!" exclaims a TV reporter. And how do citizens of the earth feel about this awesome apparition? "Man, this is unbelievable," one says to another. "It's like, huge."

"Independence Day" was, in fact, directed by Roland Emmerich and written, if you can call it that, by Mr. Emmerich and Dean Devlin. (A couple of years ago they collaborated on the glossy, idiotic "Stargate.") The two distinctions of their latest enterprise have nothing to do with making movies and everything to do with marketing: a bold and witty publicity campaign focused on patriotic themes, and a sensational TV trailer that, by contrast, plays on bipartisan relish for the prospect of a cosmic housecleaning at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. If ever a summer action thriller promised great silly fun it was this one. But silly fun is far from what it delivers. Despite anything you may have heard or read in the past few days, this movie is an overlong, insultingly clumsy compendium of B-movie cliches, with accordingly cheesy special effects.

Thus the president of the United States (Bill Pullman, looking woefully ill at ease) uses the invasion as a kind of global Gulf War to prove his manhood. His military commander (Robert Loggia), a *dummkopf* version of Schwarzkopf, shouts "Nuke 'em! Let's nuke the bastards!" Will Smith's cigar-chomping top-gun hotshot captures an alien, then punches him out. Randy Quaid's boozy crop-duster pilot does the deed that saves the world after Jeff Goldblum's cable-TV techie figures out how the deed can be done. (Mr. Goldblum also saves himself, since he seems to be the only man on earth who understands irony.)

At least those stereotypes are amusing. Not so with Harvey Fierstein's ghastly caricature of a frightened homosexual, or Judd Hirsch in the role of Mr. Goldblum's insufferable, Yiddish-accented father, a performance that suggests Jackie Mason with even less taste. As for the aliens, they're not much of anything except slimy and snaky, while their mother ship, like "Independence Day" itself, manages to be big but never imposing. For stylish entertainment keep watching the trailer.

Biographies

Jeff Goldblum--

Star of stage and screen born Oct. 22, 1952 in Pittsburgh. Began his career with the New York Shakespeare Festival under the direction of Joseph Papp, in productions such as "Two Gentlemen of Verona." Made his film debut in 1974 in "Death Wish" starring Charles Bronson. Other film credits include "Jurassic Park" (1993), "Nine Months" (1995), "The Big Chill" (1983), "The Fly" (1986), "Deep Cover" (1992), "Next Stop, Greenwich Village" (1976), "Annie Hall" (1977), "The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai" (1984), and "Silverado" (1985).

Pullman, Bill--

Veteran film actor, credits include "While You Were Sleeping" (1995), "Casper" (1995), "Sleepless in Seattle" (1993), "Malice" (1993), "Mr. Wrong" (1996), "Ruthless People" (1986), "Spaceballs" (1987), and "The Accidental Tourist" (1988).

Smith, Will--

Born Sept. 25, 1969, in Philadelphia, this multitalented star has charmed audiences on television and on the big screen, and has had success as a rap artist. Smith first came on the entertainment scene in 1986 with his chart-topping hit "Parent's Just Don't Understand." His performance with DJ Jazzy Jeff garnered him the Grammy for best Rap performance that year. His success in the recording industry led to success on television with his show "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air." Film credits include "Where the Day Takes You" (1992), "Made in America" (1993), "Six Degrees of Separation" (1993), and "Bad Boys" (1995).

[\[ID4 Curmudgeon's Page\]](#)

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