

'No Way Out' is a thriller without evil

By Charles Lieurance
Senior Editor

"No Way Out," Stuart Theater, 15th & P streets.

The mid-1970s saw a spate of paranoid, nearly Kafka-esque, domestic political thrillers released into the American cinematic mainstream. Sydney Pollock's "Three Days of the Condor," John Schlesinger's "Marathon Man," Francis Ford Coppola's early technical masterpiece, "The Conversation," and the underrated "Capricorn One" all revealed a nation conducting a secret war on itself, growing more and more afraid of the politics at home.

Movie Review

To many, representative democracy had come to mean that a representative of the democracy would be with you at every moment of the day, monitoring your every breath.

It was a hysterical vision of America in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate. It was fear of media, surveillance, the electoral process, the complexity of checks and balances, intelligence (in both a governmental and a personal sense) and an awesome fear of the power of the presidency that panicked America to the point that it elected an utter nonentity like Jimmy Carter to the post of chief executive.

Only the '80s, an age of blind confidence, could abate the fear.

As Hal Holbrook tells the hunted CIA communications expert Robert Redford in "Three Days of the Condor," "Americans just want the gasoline to run their cars; they don't care how the government gets it for them."

"No Way Out" is the first thriller so far to depict a breakdown in the age of confidence.

Considering the nation's relative apathy toward the Iran-contra affair (except when it comes to knighting the outlaws), "No Way Out" is an unlikely film. It is encouraging that at least Hollywood has seen fit to echo the paranoid sentiments of the minority over a governmental chain of command

run amok.

"No Way Out" is about the competitive chasms that have come to divide the branches of our government. The military competes with the legislative branch, the legislative branch competes with the executive branch, and within each branch there are further, more elaborate divisions.

Kevin Costner ("Silverado," "The Untouchables") plays a young naval officer, Tom Farrell, neck-deep in one of these chasms. He's led there by a Washington party-siren, Susan Atwell, played by Sean Young.

Farrell becomes involved with Atwell when he is invited to a Washington fete by his longtime friend, Scott Pritchard (Will Patton), now an aid to high-powered and high-strung senator David Brice (Gene Hackman).

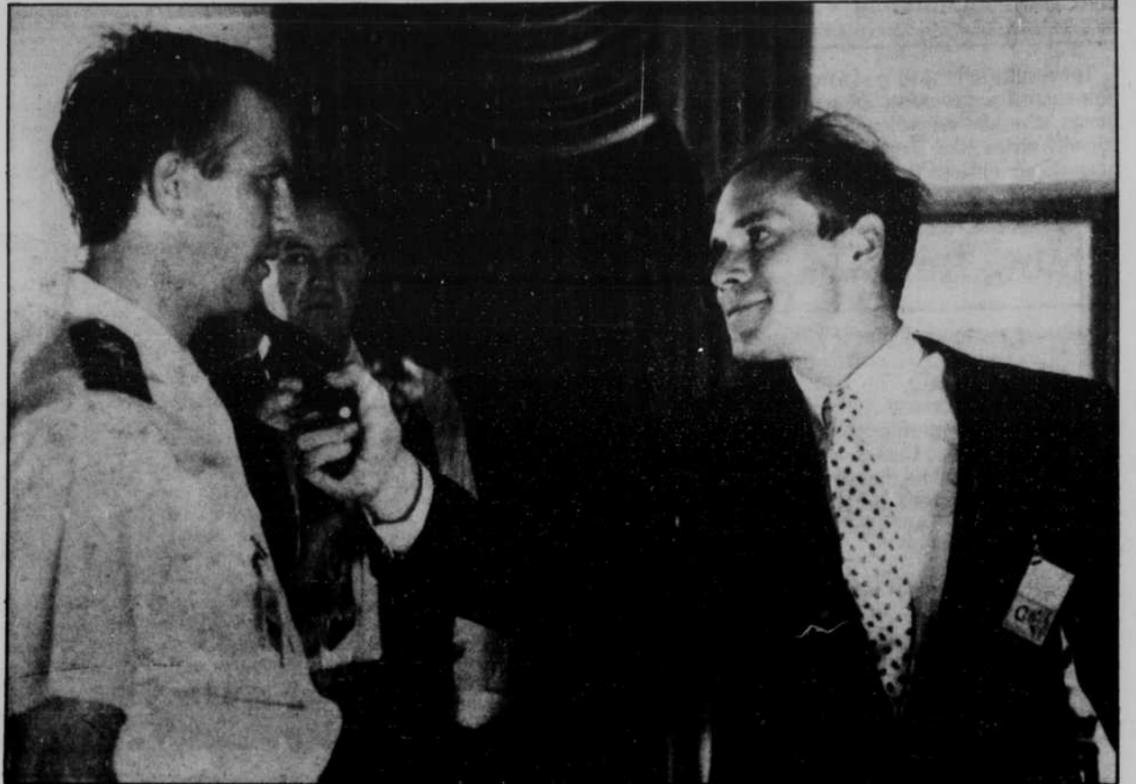
What Farrell doesn't know is that Atwell is Brice's mistress. What Brice doesn't know when he hires Farrell to work internal intelligence is that Farrell is developing a sincere, although obviously non-monogamous, relationship with Young.

Brice discovers that Atwell has taken another lover, although he is not aware who the lover is, and accidentally kills her in a jealous rage. Enter Pritchard, power-hungry and, alas, psychopathic — to help Brice out of his little jam, instead of letting him take his chances with the Washington police.

Pritchard's plan is to conduct an interdepartmental super-secret investigation of Atwell's death in hopes of turning up her lover and pinning the murder on him.

Not only will the murder be pinned on this man, but to keep things at least marginally on the up and up, Pritchard and Brice will tell everyone who asks questions that has the right security clearance that Atwell's lover and murderer were none other than the apparently famous Soviet intelligence mole, Yuri.

It's the classic mid-'70s domestic spy thriller. A man is unwittingly guided into the system, discovers how the system works, tries to escape but finds himself trapped. To overly generalize a



Kevin Costner, Gene Hackman and Will Patton in a scene from "No Way Out." Photo courtesy of Orion Pictures

Kafka theorem: Every efficient office needs its sacrificial lamb.

Claustrophobia is the key to these thrillers, and "No Way Out" has claustrophobia to spare. Not only can't Farrell breathe as he attempts to level-headedly spearhead the investigation that will crucify him, but his performance is so convincing that often the audience is breathless. From the moment Brice shows Farrell the picture of the murdered girl whose killer he must find, there is very little air in this film.

Australian director Roger Donaldson makes it worse by having the investigation go on around the clock under tight security. The main trio — Hackman, Patton and Costner — ricochet off one another like stray bullets in the tight

confines of the intelligence offices but keep that even tone of voice that keeps tension coiling around each excruciating scene. Unnerving plot twists build up at every moment, ready to explode in Costner's face.

For the performances of this trio alone, this film is brilliant, acting at its most tense and brittle with an undercurrent of histrionics that only surfaces in the audience's reactions. Performances woven this tightly are rare.

What makes the film all the more remarkable, however, is the absence of evil. The mid-'70s thrillers all had unusual images of bureaucratic evil. Hal Holbrook was the model, donning his black business suit and fatherly smile as the demon sent by some ambiguous authority in "Capricorn One" and "Three Days of the Condor." Holbrook made an admirable demon, but his essence was pure political evil. There is no such evil present in "No

Way Out," no nebulous authority to whom no one seems to answer but whom everyone obeys with silent reverence. In fact, the moral code of government is practically anarchic, working off charisma and ferocious troubleshooting.

Even the gratuitous and unfortunately mechanical climactic plot twist does not provide us with a reason for all the chaos and horror that has preceded it. The whole affair seems merely "unfortunate." Something misfires in the system, leaving everything hanging open, the system swallows itself and starts again, this time wrapped more tightly and more dangerously than before.

Although "No Way Out" does not flow with the moral ease of its mid-'70s counterparts, its ambiguity concerning responsibility is more timeless than the reactionary paranoia of the older films and, in the end, more terrifying.



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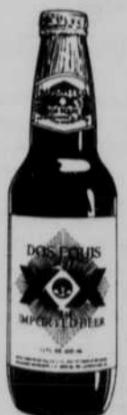
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