

Canadian Bacon (1994)

FILM REVIEW; America's Cold War With Canada. Just Kidding!

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Director: Michael Moore

Writer: Michael Moore

Stars: John Candy, Alan Alda and Rhea Perlman



When the President of the United States decides that starting a cold war with Canada would be the most efficient way to boost his sagging popularity, the news media have a field day promoting a campaign called Operation Canadian Bacon: A Line in the Snow.

Overnight the term "Canuck" acquires the same sinister connotations that were once attached to "Commie." A newscaster points to a map of the United States with maple syrup dripping over Montana and Minnesota and mutters darkly about the evil seeping across the border. Everything from Canada's use of the metric system to Neil Young and Anne Murray is identified as part of a conspiracy to destroy America.

The notion of a phony war with Canada concocted to distract the United States from its economic woes is the amusing premise behind "Canadian Bacon," a satire of American yahooism that aspires to be the 90's answer to "Dr. Strangelove." The film, written and directed by Michael Moore, goes after the selling of the Persian Gulf war and similar adventures with the same freewheeling glee with which Mr. Moore ridiculed General Motors in his popular documentary "Roger and Me."

While it's refreshing to find Hollywood producing a political satire with bite in these cautiously conservative times, "Canadian Bacon" is much sharper in its comic details than in its overall scheme. And along the way, the parody becomes so broad that the movie loses its edge and collapses into farce. In its disappointing final third, it clings to the hackneyed Hollywood formula of a race against the clock to prevent nuclear Armageddon. Where the ending of "Dr. Strangelove" went over the brink, "Canadian Bacon" plays it safe.

As "Roger and Me" suggested, Mr. Moore has a problem with all authority figures, and so it's no surprise that his new film's major characters are all either villains or fools or both. Alan Alda's President is a grinning, poll-obsessed cipher who flails around the Oval Office begging his staff for advice. When he gives an address, the words come out slightly twisted. "It's time to turn off the war machine and turn on our children," he announces in one speech.

His national security adviser, Stu Smiley (Kevin Pollak), is the personification of duplicitous yuppie evil; his chief military adviser, Gen. Dick Panzer (Rip Torn), a jibbering, cigar-chomping warmonger. The film's most dastardly character is R. J. Hacker (G. D. Spradlin), a weapons manufacturer who smokes foot-long cigars, speaks with a Southern twang and is the only person who knows the computer codes to operate a doomsday machine known as the Hacker Hellstorm.

The accidental and unworthy heroes of Operation Canadian Bacon are Bud B. Boomer (John Candy, in his second-to-last screen role), the bumbling sheriff of Niagara County on the Canadian border, and his gun-crazed sidekick, Deputy Honey (Rhea Perlman). Bud becomes a national hero when he leads a rescue operation to find Honey, whom he left stranded across the border after a previous foray. The American propaganda machine has seized on Honey as the war's first "hostage."

On his way to Toronto, which Bud mistakenly insists is the country's capital, he is stopped by an excessively polite policeman who informs him that the law requires that the graffiti on his truck ("Canucks Are Dog Meat" is one of the milder slogans) must be printed in French as well as in English.

The movie is so busy spearing the dragons of American aggression that its cartoonish vision of Canadians as wimpy Pollyannas has little resonance. If "Canadian Bacon" finally comes apart at the seams, it has enough comic asides to keep liberal funny bones tickled.

"Canadian Bacon" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested). It includes some vulgar language.

CANADIAN BACON Written and directed by Michael Moore; director of photography, Haskell Wexler; edited by Wendy Stanzler and Michael Berenbaum; music by Elmer Bernstein and Peter Bernstein; production designer, Carol Spier; produced by Mr. Moore, David Brown and Ron Rotholz; released by Gramercy Pictures. Running time: 110 minutes. This film is rated PG. WITH: Alan Alda (President), John Candy (Bud B. Boomer), Rhea Perlman (Deputy Honey), Kevin Pollak (Stu Smiley), Rip Torn (Gen. Dick Panzer) and G. D. Spradlin (R. J. Hacker).

