

# Two summer movies: Live Free or Die Hard and Evan Almighty

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*Live Free or Die Hard*, directed by Len Wiseman, screenplay by Mark Bomback; *Evan Almighty*, directed by Tom Shadyac, screenplay by Steve Oedekerk

*Live Free or Die Hard* is the fourth installment in the popular *Die Hard* film franchise which began in 1988. It is the first new addition to the series since 1995's *Die Hard: With A Vengeance*. *Live Free*, boasting more action and special effects than the previous installments, has met with a generally favorable reception from audiences and critics.

As the current episode begins, Detective John McClane (Bruce Willis) is ordered to bring Matt Farrell (Justin Long), a young, neurotic computer hacker, in for questioning. Unbeknownst to Farrell, a code he was hired to create has been put to use by terrorists plotting to launch a major cyber-attack on the US infrastructure. As McClane arrives at Farrell's apartment and attempts to take him into custody, the two men are attacked by terrorist assassins sent to eliminate the hacker. There is a massive shootout. McClane and Farrell narrowly escape with their lives. This will be just the first in a series of near misses that will keep the detective and computer expert running for cover throughout the film.

As the terrorist plans take shape, computers everywhere crash, stop lights go green simultaneously causing enormous pile-ups, the stock market begins to plummet, and mass transit systems come to a halt. Basic utilities are soon expected to go offline. McClane, with the help of the young hacker, must find the terrorists' headquarters and stop them before they're able to complete their destructive operations.

*Live Free or Die Hard* is a poor film full of stereotyped characters and unreal events. The movie is unusually brutal, even by the franchise's own standards. A sequence in which McClane fights a female terrorist (played by Maggie Q), pulling a clump

of hair from her head and then running her down with a car, is deeply unsettling. McClane makes jokes—occasionally tinged with racism, the terrorist was Asian—about the woman's death throughout the remainder of the film.

As with most of the *Die Hard* movies—and numerous other modern action movies—there is also a brains vs. brawn element to the story. In the case of *Live Free or Die Hard*, Farrell, the nervous computer hacker, must learn from the hard-boiled Luddite John McClane how to be brave and fight and, finally, to kill. When he complains to the detective about the news media being untrustworthy and subservient to corporate control, McClane barks back with a simple and stern “Shut up!” Later when, after nearly losing his life once again, Farrell protests saying the two aren't winning their fight against terrorism and that winning is altogether impossible, McClane not surprisingly disagrees and pushes his way onward to battle. How this relates to the ongoing crisis in Iraq should not be lost on anyone.

In a film which leans so far toward the right it's not at all surprising that the character of terrorist mastermind Gabriel (Timothy Olyphant) is a kind of demented, militant quasi-leftist. A computer wizard formerly employed by the Department of Defense, Gabriel was dismissed for threatening to go public with information about security flaws in important computer systems left unresolved after 9/11. He seeks his revenge by violently exposing to the world how easily these flaws can be exploited.

In a nod to anticommunism, the filmmakers have Gabriel comment in one scene on what he perceives to be money-obsessed Americans by calling them “Useful idiots, as Lenin said.” Lenin, as far we know, never said any such thing, but that hardly matters to the filmmakers. Gabriel is an unconvincing, unreal

character. Not especially menacing, he spends a great deal of time cracking jokes at the expense of his henchman.

While the *Die Hard* films most certainly appeal to some very backward impulses, one suspects that portions of the audience are responding to something else in the series. Bruce Willis is a capable actor and his personality undoubtedly has something to do with the popularity of the films. The character of John McClane, particularly in the earlier movies, is often forced to battle with the bureaucratic leadership of the police and FBI, something that no doubt resonates with viewers. The character's ability to retain his contrarian spirit and his sense of humor—a gallows humor to be sure—while faced with enormous hardship also has its appeal. While exiting the theater after one showing of *Live Free or Die Hard*, an audience member could be overheard saying, “What I liked most about it is that whenever he got into trouble, he would laugh.”

*Evan Almighty* is the sequel to 2003's *Bruce Almighty* in which Jim Carrey played a character given the powers of God. In the present film, Evan Baxter (Steve Carrell), a newly elected member of Congress, is approached by God (Morgan Freeman) and instructed to build an ark. Naturally, he believes the individual claiming to be God is insane, ignores the order and goes about his business.

Not at all discouraged, God presses the matter. Large supplies of wood and boxes of tools mysteriously arrive at Baxter's home. He's followed by animals that swoop and swarm into his congressional office. Soon, he begins to take on the appearance of an Old Testament character, growing a long beard that can't be shaved off and donning a robe that could have been borrowed from the wardrobe department of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*.

Congressman Long (John Goodman), the last word in corrupt politicians, has been trying to get Baxter to co-sponsor a bill that will allow housing developments on protected lands. To this end, he has set Baxter up in a lavish office unheard of for a freshman representative. The young congressman, being somewhat self-centered and naive, is more than happy to go along with Long's scheme.

But as he slowly becomes a believer in God and goes to work building the ark, Baxter comes to realize the error of his ways and stands up to the corrupt politician.

“You are destroying our national parks for profit,” he says to the villainous congressman.

Newly transformed through the grace of God, Baxter continues his work on the ark amid public ridicule and the skepticism of his friends and family. Warned that a flood is imminent, he must convince the doubting onlookers gathered to witness his humiliation to enter the ark before it's too late.

*Evan Almighty* is a disappointing film. With religion and political corruption as central themes in the story, it could have made for a biting social satire. Instead, we get a rather toothless challenge to corruption in the government and a fairly affectionate and reverential retelling of the Noah's Ark story. Steve Carrell, a talented performer best known for his work on the television shows “The Office” and “The Daily Show,” thrashes around trying to create something out of the material, but can't overcome its weaknesses or the poor direction by Shadyac.

As with many other comedies being made today, the jokes in *Evan Almighty*—in addition to not being terribly funny—are not organically part of the story. They are placed into the story almost at random, wherever they might fit and without much thought given to timing. Too often the film falls back on gross-out humor and slapstick even as its subject matter calls out for a more high-minded and critical approach.

Most embarrassingly, the heavy-handed message of *Evan Almighty* is delivered straight from God's mouth: “You know how to change the world, son? One random act of kindness at a time.” Who could worship a God as banal as that?



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