

Recurring nightmare

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [August 10, 2004](#) issue

The news that director Jonathan Demme (*The Silence of the Lambs*) was making a new version of the 1962 cold-war thriller *The Manchurian Candidate* provoked howls of protest from purists who didn't see the need for an updated version of that memorable film (especially since it was out of circulation for 25 years—a political fallout of the Kennedy assassination). Demme and his screenwriters found elements in the original novel by Richard Condon and the screenplay by George Axelrod that they felt could be reconfigured to fit the current scene—conspiracy, high technology, the omnipresence of the media, and the political influence of big business and bigger money.

The basic plot remains the same. A platoon of U.S. soldiers (now placed in the gulf war in 1991 instead of Korea in 1952) is kidnapped and brainwashed into believing that one of their own, a shy sergeant named Raymond Shaw (Liev Schreiber), performed acts of valor that deserve the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Shaw's heroics are recalled more than a decade later by the platoon's commander, Major Bennett Marco (Denzel Washington), who delivers inspirational speeches praising his former sergeant (now a U.S. congressman). But something is rotten in the district of Washington. Marco has begun having violent and disturbing dreams about what really happened, and the images that haunt him paint a very different picture of Sergeant Shaw.

Like the original film, Demme's version follows Marco's attempts to get at the truth—both for the sake of his sanity and the good of the country—while Shaw ascends the ladder of political success with the help of his shrewish mother (Meryl Streep), a former senator who longs to see her war-hero son made vice president.

The key to both versions lies in the title. In the original, Manchuria refers not only to a region but to the shadowy communist threat that emanated from that corner of the world. Shaw symbolized the slavish obedience of the communist world. (His blank stare resembled that of the pod people in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, another story with a cold-war subtext.) In the new version, it refers to Manchurian

Global, a huge conglomerate that exploits politicians in order to grow larger and more influential. By making the bad guys CEOs rather than communists, the film sacrifices the mesmerizing political power of the allusion to Manchuria.

The new *Manchurian Candidate* has many strengths, including Tak Fujimoto's dizzying cinematography, but with each scene I found myself thinking that the original is far superior in terms of emotion and message. It may have been an inventive idea to turn the film into a generic mix of politics and science fiction, but removing the cold-war connection removes a crucial piece. It's like remaking *Dr. Strangelove* and removing the political context that gave it life—the horrific absurdity of the 1960s nuclear standoff.

Demme has said in interviews that he likes to think of the new *Manchurian Candidate* not as a remake, but as a second sibling born of the same novel. That's an intriguing concept. In this case, despite the film's star power and big budget, it's the black sheep of the family.