By FRED BARNES

Not often is a Hollywood movie denounced for airing the "cockeyed nightmares of those on the lunatic fringe, the self-styled patriots who might even embarrass the members of the John Birch Society."

Yet that's what Vincent Canby, the easily aroused film critic of the New York Times, wrote about "Red Dawn."

Nor do reviewers routinely dismiss a movie that emerges as a box-office hit as "the first homegrown fascist film since "The Fountainhead."

But that's the rap that Peter Biskind, the editor of American Film and critic for the Washington

Weekly, laid on "Red Dawn."

Nor does TRB normally take time in his column in the New Republic to mention a movie, much less attack one as exemplifying the "worst kind of patriotism, appealing to "nativist sentiment," and signaling that Hollywood "can swerve right just as faithfully as it swerved left fifteen years ago." But he made an exception in the case of "Red Dawn."

What is it about this movie that touches off such hysteria in the press?

Admittedly, it is hokey in parts, clumsy in others, and poorly acted in still others. The plot isn't without holes, either. But it's not these flaws that get much criticism.

The objection to "Red Dawn" is that it is anti-Communist — and unabashedly, aggressively and nastily so.

This is unacceptable. It's one thing for a movie to be critical of swastikas and the Gestapo. But to call the Deuce Hunter" was a few years ago, so long the movie also makes the point that the Vietnam War had a devastating impact on the American. But it is something else to show Communist troops in an unfavorable light.

But as long as the guerillas who resist the Soviet-Cuban invasion... The movie is measurably propagandistic, lacking the shining message of Triumph of the Will," and predictably conservative in its talking-heads format.

Notice the mention of "Triumph of the Will." The pro-Nazi film made 50 years ago by the German director Leni Riefenstahl. An old tactic is at work here: luring any conservative film fan's fear of Nazi bigotry.

Which brings us back to "Red Dawn."

Guess what Biskind, who edits the magazine that ran Rich's pro-

Protestantings, says about John Milius, the director of "Red Dawn."

"Milius sees himself as the Leni Riefenstahl of the Reagan administration," he wrote. The movie "embodies" a type of German movie in the years before World War II that enthused tough, virile mountain climbers, "later to become Hitler, you know."

On the smear level, you can't do much better than that.

Despite the frothing reviews — or maybe because of them — "Red Dawn" has trounced a popular cheddar. TRB argued that it represents patriots of an exclusionary sort.

"We're told that the communist invasion began with illegal aliens from Mexico blowing up a SAC base — an appeal to nativist sentiment made especially ugly by its complete logic," he wrote. "But the dominant form of exclusionary patriotism is political, and the main purveyor is the Republican Party. Republicans have taken as a campaign theme that anyone who disagrees with them is un-American."

TRB meant that as a slur on the movie, which is not the case. The movie is "Human Events," that is a supporter of Ronald Reagan.

But I think the appeal of the movie has nothing to do with what type of patriotism it reflects. Folks happen to like a film in which communists, not some evil cabal of foreigners, terrorize the country.

And they don't care if every movie critic of every newspaper and magazine in the country tells them otherwise.

Fred Barnes is National Political Reporter for the Baltimore Sun and writes this column for The American Spectator.