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David Boaz: 'Avatar' might have lefty themes, but it stands up for property rights

By David Boaz

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Conservatives have been very critical of the Golden Globe-winning film "Avatar" for its mystical melange of trite leftist themes. But what they have missed is that the essential conflict in the story is a battle over property rights.

"Avatar," written and directed by James Cameron and set in 2154, is the story of young American Jake Sully, who joins a military mission to the distant moon Pandora, which has a supply of an expensive and almost impossible to obtain mineral (thus its name, "unobtainium"). Living among the tall, blue natives in the form of an "avatar" — a lab-created body hooked up by Wi-Fi to his own brain — Sully comes to doubt his mission and to join the Na'vi people in resisting the earthlings' designs on their land.

Despite its magnificent 3-D special effects, it features a tired plot and merely serviceable dialogue.

But conservatives have focused on the ideas that the film embodies. In National Review, Frederica Mathewes-Green mocked its dreamy vision of "the apparently eternal conflict between gentle people with flowers in their hair and technology-crazed meanies."

Ross Douthat in the New York Times called it an

"apologia for pantheism." John Podhoretz in the Weekly Standard complained that it asks "the audience to root for the defeat of American soldiers at the hands of an insurgency." Lots of conservatives complain that a movie about American soldiers invading another planet and killing people is an allegory about the Iraq war. And many agree with Bolivia's socialist president that "Avatar" is anti-capitalist.

They all have a point. The film is a perfect soufflé of left-wing attitudes.

But conservative critics are missing the conflict at the heart of the movie. It's quite possible that Cameron missed it too.

The earthlings have come to Pandora to obtain unobtainium. In theory, it's not a military mission, it's just the RDA Corp. with a military bigger than most countries. The Na'vi call them the Sky People.

To get the unobtainium, RDA is willing to relocate the natives, who live on top of the richest deposit. But alas, that land is sacred to the Na'vi, who worship the goddess Eywa, so they're not moving. When the visitors realize that, they move in with tanks, bulldozers and giant military robots, laying waste to a sacred tree and any Na'vi who don't move fast enough.

Conservatives see this as anti-American, anti-military and anti-corporate or anti-capitalist. But they're just reacting to the leftist ethos of the film.

They fail to see what's really happening. People have traveled to Pandora to take something that belongs to the Na'vi: their land and the minerals under it. That's a stark violation of property rights, the foundation of the free market and indeed of civilization.

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Sure, the Na'vi — who, like all of the people in lefty dreams, are psychically linked to one another and to all living creatures — probably view the land as their collective property. At least for human beings, private property rights are a much better way to secure property and prosperity. Nevertheless, it's pretty clear that the land belongs to the Na'vi, not the Sky People.

Conservatives rallied to the defense of Susette Kelo when the Pfizer Corp. and the city of New London, Conn., tried to take her land. She was unreasonable too, like the Na'vi: She wasn't holding out for a better price; she just didn't want to sell her house. As Jake tells his bosses, "They're not going to give up their home."

"Avatar" is like a space opera of the Kelo case, which went to the Supreme Court in 2005. Peaceful people defend their property against outsiders who want it and who have vastly more power. Jake rallies the Na'vi with the stirring cry "And we will show the Sky People that they cannot take whatever they want! And that this is our land!"

That's a story conservatives ought to be able to understand.

"Avatar" has its problems, from stilted dialogue to its embrace of the long-discredited myth of the "noble savage" in tune with nature. But conservatives should appreciate a rare defense of property rights coming out of Hollywood.

David Boaz is executive vice president of the Cato Institute and the author of "Libertarianism: A Primer" and "The Politics of Freedom." He wrote this for the Los Angeles Times.

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