

THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER

Directed by John McTiernan

Produced by Mace Neufeld

Distributed by Paramount Pictures

Released in 1990

Remarkably good in many ways, *The Hunt for Red October* excels as a study in leadership. While not as single-minded of purpose as *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949), perhaps the definitive cinematic study of leadership, our film is far more entertaining.

Sean Connery's Marco Ramius is, as observed in the film, "one cool customer." In keeping with most leaders, he's first distinguished by his loneliness. Ramius lost his beloved wife just a year previous, he's the top captain of the Soviet Navy, and he is, at heart, still a Lithuanian in the service of a foreign country (when he was born, in the inter-war period, Lithuania was free).

He keeps his feelings to himself but for three occasions, once with Jack Ryan, and twice with his first officer. By these confessions we learn that Ramius views the Cold War as a tragedy. In some respects, he has thrown his life away, and he will not compound his error by allowing the stealthy *Red October* to fulfill its designed purpose; this forty-year drama staged by superpowers will not be climaxed with a missile launch from *his* ship.

Thus he is not two-, but three-faced, showing one face to his crew, and another (in the dinner scene) to his officers (which saves one for himself). But that doesn't make him less admirable, as leadership always demands some acting—hiding purpose, strategy, and fear—to inspire confidence, respect, and loyalty. In the dinner scene Ramius is, of course, far more honest with his officers than he was with his cheery, bellicose address to the crew. But he refuses to be goaded into a verbal fight, and as his officers panic, he remains perfectly implacable—he assesses the likelihood of their deaths like he was handicapping a boxing match. The officers can take peace, at least, in the fact that Ramius knows what they are up against and remains in control of himself.

Of course, he's also in control of them. His brilliant decision to invoke Cortez's burning of the ships leaves the officers with nothing to cling to but their renegade captain. That's cutthroat leadership—deny your minions any other options and they'll stick with you, even when times are tough. Sure, they may say it's unfair that Ramius made these decisions—the letter and the murder—without them. But if Ramius had done so, he would no longer be in charge. More important, no one would have been willing to risk death for freedom. Ramius *was* willing, and his men would later thank him for being their strength.

At some point leadership stops being about manipulation and control, and it becomes a matter of principle. Even though Ramius is a traitor to their country, he still cares for his crew. They are innocent and he is determined that they survive this adventure unscathed. Even while working like the devil to get what he wants, he remembers that these men are still his responsibility.

More significant, Ramius does his own dirty work. He murders Putin, with no apparent animus, because the political officer could have instigated a mutiny. Later in the film, when his

AN ILLUMINED ILLUSIONS ESSAY BY IAN C. BLOOM

executive officer is killed shielding Ramius from gunfire, Ramius goes after the KGB saboteur himself. It's very dangerous, sure, but Ramius led his men into this and he did kill in cold blood, and were it not for the sacrifice of his first officer he would already be dead. So he fights, as is his duty.

Finally, Ramius sent the letter not for ego, but for honor. Apart from its possible value of signaling the Americans, the letter was a declaration that Ramius would not just slink away. No, he would stand and declare his contempt for the Soviet Union and challenge it, first, to reform, and second, to stop him from defecting. He swore loyalty to the Motherland, and by this letter, he frees himself of that oath. *I am willing to die for my convictions; therefore I deserve to be free.* This is what it means to accept responsibility, and to accept responsibility is, ultimately, what freedom is all about.