

# John Travolta's Alien Notion

*He Plays a Strange Creature In a New Sci-Fi Film, but That's Not the Only Curious Thing About This Project*

By RICHARD LEIBY  
Washington Post Staff Writer

**S**METHING otherworldly is happening inside Hangar 12, something they're trying to keep secret. But we can tell you this much: John Travolta is involved, and so are space aliens.

Soldiers have secured the perimeter. "Warning: This establishment is under permanent surveillance by the military police," a sign says. Absolutely no trespassing, by order of Canada's minister of national defense.

But through the 10-foot-high chain-link fence topped with triple strands of barbed wire, you can spy pieces of weird aircraft. They look like menacing insects. Occasionally a large, hairy creature will amble into view.

It's only a movie, the authorities say. The Canadian military is simply renting a secure facility to Travolta and his film crew. Here is the official story:

Inside Hangar 12, they are making an \$80 million sci-fi epic called "Battlefield Earth." Travolta, the co-producer, stars as a nine-foot-tall alien overlord with glowing amber eyes set in a grotesquely elongated head. He has hooklike talons for hands. "Planet of the Apes" meets "Star Wars": Travolta as you've never seen him before.

Okay. But what's the *real* story? At the end of the millennium, you can't believe press releases. On the Internet, startling allegations are flying: about an invasion fleet deployed from the Marcab Confederacy; about mind-control implant stations set up on Mars; about the parallels between the top-secret teachings of the Church of Scientology and the novel "Battlefield Earth" by Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard.

So is "Battlefield Earth" a recruiting film for Scientology?

Nonsense, Travolta says. The movie, he keeps telling reporters, has absolutely, positively no connection to Scientology. No sirree.

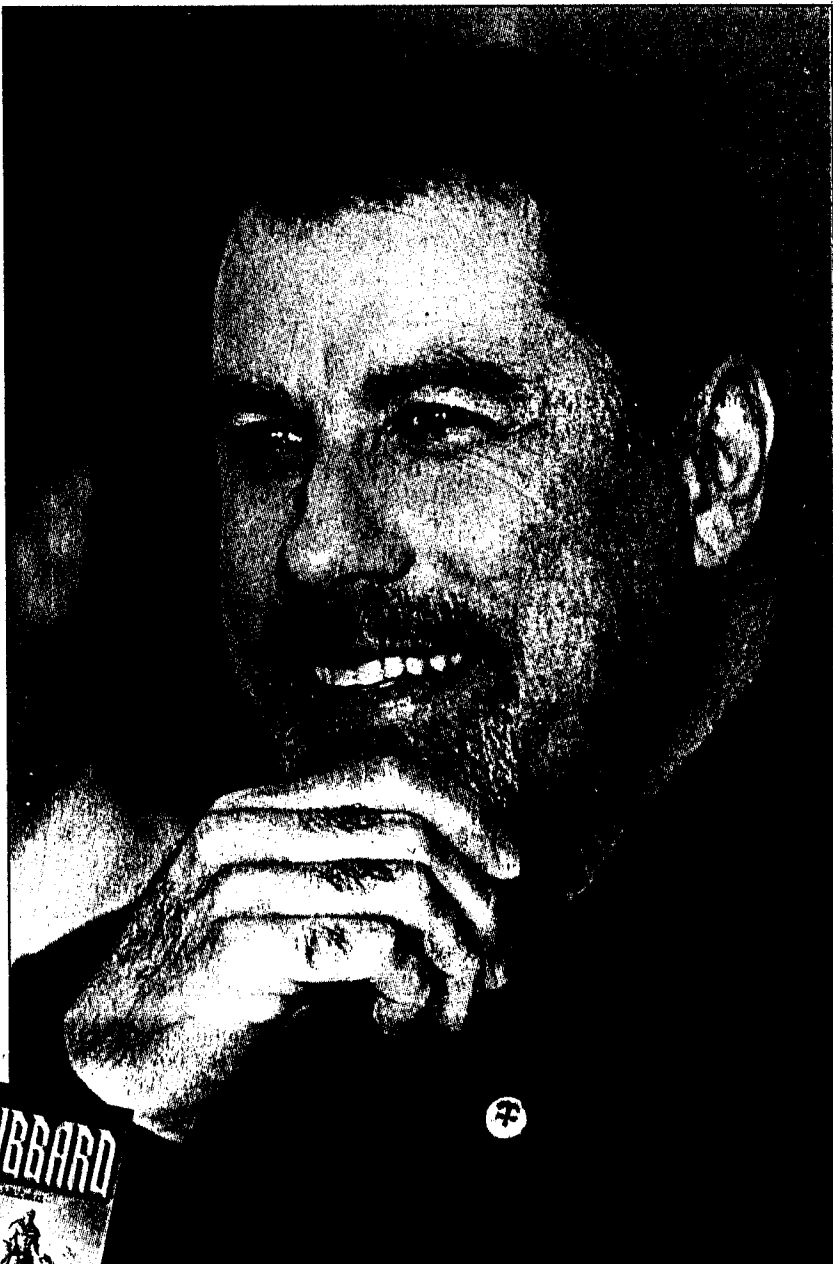
Travolta's publicists refused several requests from The Washington Post to interview the star. See, he's already put it all on the record:

Since 1975 he has been a devotee of Scientology, an "applied religious philosophy" that claims millions of adherents. He credits Hubbard, the late science-fiction author, for all his worldly and spiritual successes. The actor believes that Hubbard's teachings and writings hold mankind's hope for salvation.

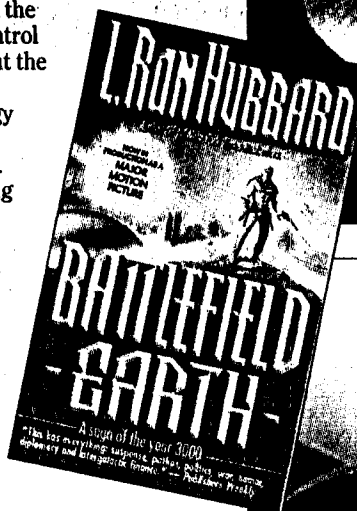
Travolta calls "Battlefield Earth" one of the most popular books published in this century. He has been trying to make it into a movie for 15 years. But until now, he's told reporters, he didn't have the Hollywood clout to do it. The film will be distributed and marketed with backing from two major studios—Morgan Creek Productions and Warner Bros.—and is scheduled to open next May.

"The truth of why I'm doing it is because it's a great piece of science fiction," Travolta has said. "This is not

MONTREAL



ABOVE: BY RYAN REMIÖRZ—ASSOCIATED PRESS; BELOW: BY ROBERT J. GALBRAITH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



"This has nothing to do with Scientology," says John Travolta of "Battlefield Earth," his new film based on a novel by L. Ron Hubbard, founder of the controversial church. Left, an actor in alien "Psycho" get-up on the heavily guarded set in Montreal.

# John Travolta, Out on the 'Battlefield'

TRAVOLTA, From G1

about him [Hubbard]. . . . I'm very interested in Scientology, but that's personal. This is different. This has nothing to do with Scientology."

But maybe this has everything to do with a cult: a paranoid, insular group that refuses to answer further questions from the press because it hopes to wring as much money from the public as possible and doesn't believe in giving away its secrets for free. It's about a hierarchy that hopes to dominate the world with its propaganda and turn us all into robotic supplicants.

In other words, it's about . . . the movie business.

## Dwelling Among the Stars

Who doesn't love John Travolta? Who wouldn't want to be Travolta? He earns \$20 million a picture, owns four homes and four airplanes; he jets around the world with his beautiful actress-wife, Kelly Preston, whom he is constantly kissing in the vicinity of tabloid photographers. The couple periodically lands to make movies and pose on magazine covers and promote their movies, giving interviews about how much they love each other.

John has given Kelly a bit part in his pet project. Like him, she'll play one of the Psychlos—the horrible monsters in "Battlefield Earth." The Psychlos are pitiless fascists who have turned Earth into a prison planet in which humans are hunted and killed for sport.

"I have a huge head, and I walk on these stiltlike legs," Preston recently told TV Guide's online edition.

She, too, embraces Scientology, saying it has "cleaned away everything that was unwanted in myself." Other celebrities say the church keeps them off drugs and provides balance in the roller-coaster world of show biz. Newly arrived L.A. dreamers sign up for courses, hoping to make connections that will get them out of those bellhop jobs at the Mondrian and onto the big screen.

Church counseling relies on a battery-powered contraption called an "E-meter"—a lie detector-type device invented by Hubbard that supposedly helps members locate sources of mental and spiritual distress. Scientology says its therapies can make people smarter, healthier, more successful.

It seeks, in Hubbard's words, "a civilization without insanity, without criminals and without war"—an ideal also espoused by Travolta.

But there's a reason the church is often called controversial. In France this month Scientology staff members were convicted of fraud. A German court ruled that Scientology used "inhuman and totalitarian practices." A California appeals court branded its treatment of one

member "manifestly outrageous." (His award of \$2.5 million for "serious emotional injury" was twice upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, but he has never been able to collect.) Scientology believes such findings are the result of religious intolerance.

Church policy letters show that Scientology wants to eradicate psychiatry and psychology, as well as gain control, or the allegiance, of "key political figures" and the proprietors of "all news media." Its avowed goal is to "Clear the Planet"—that is, to turn everyone into a Scientologist who has achieved the level of "Clear" through Hubbard's books, drills and E-meter.

Celebrities are key to the crusade to clear the planet. Hubbard realized in Scientology's early days that the public adores and mimics celebs—not because they're necessarily intelligent or enlightened, but because they're rich and famous. In 1955—five years after publishing his cornerstone text, "Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health"—he ordered followers to bring stars into the fold, knowing their magnetism would attract ordinary pew-packers.

If Isaac Hayes, Tom Cruise, Jenna Elfman, Kirstie Alley, Lisa Marie Presley and Chick Corea all groove on Scientology, then it must be, well, groovy. Who wouldn't want to dwell among the stars?

## Psychlo-Babble

Writing "Battlefield Earth: A Saga of the Year 3000," Hubbard revisited the space operas he'd churned out for pennies a word before he started his own religion. It weighs in at 1,050 pages in paperback and is considered by sci-fi fans to be Hubbard's last good work, written while he was in hiding in 1980. (He died at age 74 in 1986.)

Hubbard had disappeared to escape the scandals that engulfed his church in the late '70s. Scientology was besieged by lawsuits alleging fraud, brainwashing and criminal conduct, and was tarred by the indictment of several top officials who had infiltrated federal agencies, bugged an IRS meeting and burgled files the government kept on the group. Hubbard himself was named an unindicted co-conspirator in the



FILE PHOTO

1978 criminal case; his third wife, Mary Sue, was sentenced to four years in prison for orchestrating the schemes.

He turned to writing what he called "pure science fiction." But it's not difficult to see connections between his fiction and his religious teachings.

For those who pay enough to achieve its top levels (as Travolta has), Scientology offers a secret cosmology centered on intergalactic travel, space battles and encounters with aliens. Traditional faiths may embrace visions of Heaven and Hell, redeemers and miracles, but Hubbard says all those were merely "implanted" in humans by extraterrestrials eons ago.

Since the early '50s, the founder's sacred writings have focused on his belief that Earthlings are the pawns of aliens. Hubbard taught that the psychiatric establishment—which always looked askance at his theories—was not just a present-day evil, but a timeless one. In a distant galaxy, alien "psychs" devised implants that would ultimately wreck the spiritual progress of human beings, he said. The psychs and their "blackened souls," he preached,

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were to blame for all crime, violence and sin. "They destroyed every great civilization to date and are hard at work on this one."

In "Battlefield Earth," Hubbard writes that the ruthless Psychlo race was the tool of a medical cult that implanted metallic capsules in Psychlo babies' skulls so they grow up to become sadists. He writes that these "mental doctors"—called "catrists"—made up the "real, hidden government."

Psychlo . . . catrist? It doesn't take a degree in semiotics to make the connection.

"Battlefield Earth" wasn't the first time Hubbard mixed themes from Holy Writ and blazing ray guns. In 1977, he penned a screenplay titled "Revolt in the Stars," featuring an intergalactic overlord named Xenu and his psychiatric advisers, Stug and Sty. They carry out a holocaust by rounding up "unwanted" beings from every planet and transporting them to Earth, where they are put in volcanoes and slaughtered with atomic bombs. This extermination operation, which occurred 75 million years ago, is called "Phase III."

The plot of "Revolt" mirrors a sacred Scientology text called "OT III" (which stands for Operating Thetan Section III). It is revealed to Scientologists only after they pay tens of thousands of dollars and undergo many hours of intensive "processing" to prepare them for the Xenu message.

The scripture—widely leaked by disgruntled ex-members—describes how the exterminated alien beings were fused into clusters in the volcanoes and attached themselves to human spirits. To become truly free, Hubbard teaches, parishioners must detect these aliens and get rid of them using the E-meter device. (To do this, you hold a metal can in each hand and focus on a point in the body where a sensation or pain is perceived.)

"Revolt" was shopped around Hollywood in late 1979 but never made it to the screen. Undaunted, Hubbard turned his imagination to a book he titled "Man, the Endangered Species"—later to be called "Battlefield Earth." Also around this time, a young actor named John Travolta began his journey into the uppermost levels of Scientology, learning about the secret agenda of the aliens, the implanters and the psychiatrists.

## Secrets of the Universe

In the summer of 1974, Ernest Borgnine took a role that, for an Oscar winner, must have marked a low point. Made up to resemble a demented goat, he played Satan in "The Devil's Rain," a cheesy horror flick being shot in Mexico. Also on the set: John Travolta in his first movie role. He had lines like "Blasphemer! Get him, he is a blasphemer!"

Heavily influenced by his mother,

a suburban New Jersey drama coach, Johnny Travolta grew up something of an acting prodigy; as a teenager he aceed auditions for Broadway roles and for TV soaps, and toured nationally in the musical "Grease." But when he came to Los Angeles to break into films, he was just another struggling no-name.

"He was in need of friends. He was depressed. . . . It was a very lonely time for him," actress Joan Prather later told Rolling Stone

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—John Travolta

magazine. Prather, who also appeared in "The Devil's Rain," gave Travolta some Scientology books while they were in Mexico. By 1975 he was relying on Hubbard's E-meter to handle his neuroses instead of continuing to see a therapist.

"It made sense to me right away because it seemed like a means of self-help," the actor is quoted as saying in the biography "John Travolta: Back in Character," by Wensley Clarkson. "A meter shows you when you're responding to a bad experience in your past. You find the source of pain, acknowledge it, deal with it."

A lackluster student who had dropped out of school after the 10th grade, Travolta declared that he didn't need a formal education: "Now I'm into Scientology, the science of the mind." By 1980, Travolta told Rolling Stone, he had achieved the state of "Clear," which he described as "cleansed of unwanted feelings and mental images."

As he rocketed to fame in the sitcom "Welcome Back, Kotter" and such movies as "Saturday Night Fever" and "Grease," Travolta became a revered figure at Scientology's Celebrity Centre in Los Angeles, which was established to expand Hubbard's teachings into the artistic world. He was identified in a church photograph as an Operating Thetan—a super-being who could claim powers beyond the heightened awareness and intelligence levels achieved by "Clears."

He was unlocking, as he later told a Scientology publication, "the secrets of the universe."

Operating Thetans learn about the evil Xenu, survive the so-called "Wall of Fire" and begin to divest themselves of alien infestations. The

revelation that humans are controlled by alien spirits prompts some Scientologists to quit the church, but to others it confirms Hubbard's genius.

Travolta stopped taking Scientology courses for about a year and a half after reaching the Operating Thetan stage. He expressed dissatisfaction with the church's management, which was then undergoing purges and an onslaught of negative publicity for harassing its enemies.

"I don't believe in the way the organization is being run," the actor told Rolling Stone in 1983. But he called Hubbard's teachings "pretty brilliant. . . . I try to separate the material and the organization."

He rallied to Scientology's defense in the mid-'80s after juries awarded former followers millions of dollars for fraud and mental abuse they say they suffered as church members. (One judgment was upheld on appeal, and others were settled out of court.) When some of the sacred scriptures—including the Xenu story—ended up in a court file, 1,500 Scientologists crammed the courthouse to block public access to the documents. In 1986 Travolta himself marched into Los Angeles Superior Court, hoping to make a pro-church speech in the case where the documents had been revealed. (The judge instructed Travolta to sit down, and he complied.)

## Detecting Enemies

He's legendary among reporters for being a gracious and accommodating interview subject, known to give a hug or offer to relieve a sore throat using Scientology techniques. Many acquaintances talk of Travolta's warmth and kindness. But he shows a more pugnacious side when talking about church enemies—described in Hubbard's writings as "suppressive persons." Skeptical journalists, ex-members who sue Scientology, government investigators or family members antagonistic to the sect would all qualify.

Travolta has taken special courses to help him detect enemies. "I don't think anyone should be tolerant of suppressive acts," Travolta said in a 1990 interview with the church's Celebrity magazine. "I no longer doubt when I am in the presence of suppression. And I am very unreasonable about it."

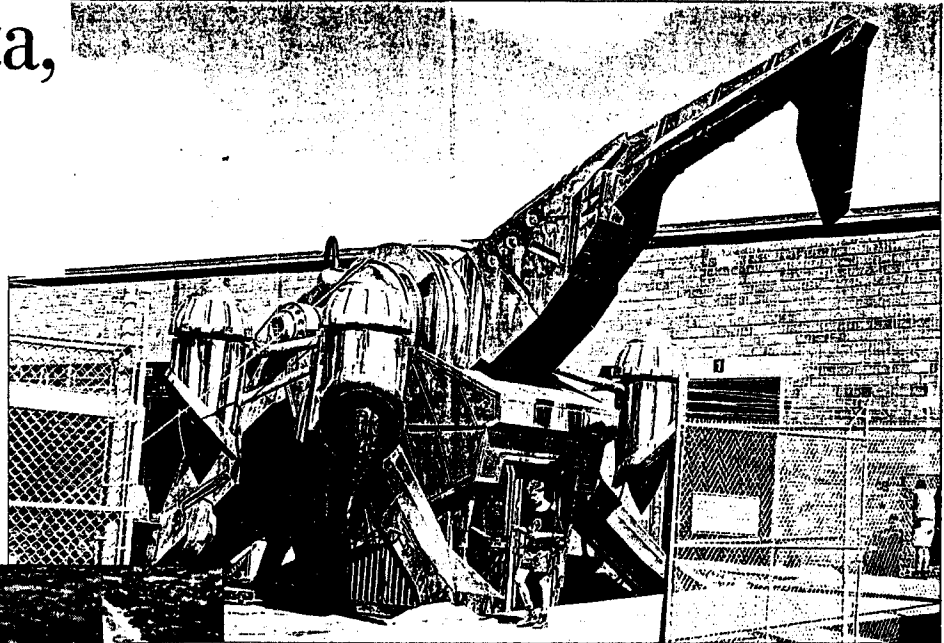
In Scientology writings, a suppressive person deserves no mercy. He may be "deprived of property or injured by any means by any Scientologist," according to a 1967 Hubbard policy letter. "May be tricked, sued, or lied to or destroyed."

Travolta never speaks about such policies in mainstream publications. Nor does he mention his Operating Thetan status, which, according to church teachings, gives him the ability to control "matter, energy, space, time, form and life."

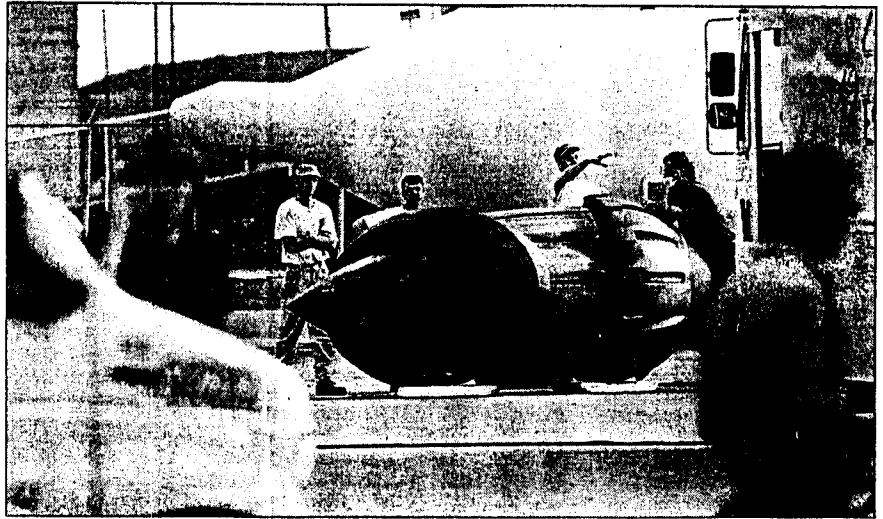
Travolta renewed his OT studies

See TRAVOLTA, C5, Col. 1

# John Travolta, Out on the 'Battlefield'



PHOTOS ABOVE AND BELOW BY ROBERT J. CALDWELL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST  
An alien spacecraft, above, and other props, below, glimpsed on the set of "Battlefield Earth," scheduled for release next spring. The film is based on the novel by Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, left, who died in 1986 at age 74.



FILE PHOTO BY LEMNOX McLEOD—ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Travolta in 1996 with wife Kelly Preston, who, like her husband, is cast as an alien in "Battlefield Earth."

# In Montreal, a Well-Guarded 'Battlefield'

TRAVOLTA, From G4

in the 1990s after teaming up with fellow advanced-level Scientologist Kirstie Alley for the "Look Who's Talking" pictures. In 1996, he told a Scientology magazine about a new course he was taking called "L10"—which, according to church literature, helps Operating Thetans "unleash potentials not seen in this sector of the galaxy for a long, long time." (Price: \$1,000 per hour.) At the time, Travolta was starring in "Phenomenon," playing a lunkhead who, after a presumed alien encounter, becomes a genius with superhuman powers.

In the same Celebrity interview, the actor cited the popularity of his '90s films "Pulp Fiction," "Get Shorty" and "Broken Arrow" as evidence of his "upwards statistics," thanks to Scientology. But he has never publicly faulted Hubbard's teachings for his career lows. According to Scientologists, the founder's technology can never be wrong.

Travolta's career seemed to enter a death spiral in the 1980s. "He was poised on the edge of oblivion," Clarkson writes in his otherwise gushing biography. "He was accepting bad parts, and turning down good ones, with unerring consistency. By 1989, he was seriously considering a new career."

His comeback was launched when he accepted the role of a heroin-addicted hit man in ultra-violent "Pulp Fiction," directed by Quentin Tarantino. The filmmakers were offering Travolta a fee of only \$150,000. According to some former Scientology insiders, the church wasn't enamored of the grisly role. None of that deterred him.

"It is a very anti-drug, anti-crime story," Travolta told Celebrity in 1993. "It shows the brutality and crudeness of it all."

The part won Travolta his first Oscar nomination since "Saturday Night Fever," and good scripts started coming his way again. Soon he was commanding fees in the millions. In 1994 the church named him as L. Ron Hubbard's "personal public relations officer" at a Los Angeles ceremony, and he has since become its best-known disciple.

(When quizzed in recent interviews about the impact of gory imagery and murder in his last film, "The General's Daughter," Travolta said he didn't think the media inspired anyone to commit acts of violence. What's to blame for crime, he declared, are psychiatric medications. He mentioned Prozac and Ritalin. It was pure Hubbard-speak: Psychiatry causes crime.)

In 1996, after winning a Golden



BY RICHARD FOREMAN JR.—PARAMOUNT PICTURES

John Travolta and Madeleine Stowe in his most recent film, "The General's Daughter." When asked in an interview about the impact of the movie's gory imagery, he said psychiatric medications, not the media, cause crime.

Globe award for "Get Shorty," Travolta acknowledged and quoted "a great man, L. Ron Hubbard." Later, backstage, he told reporters he wanted to make a movie of Hubbard's life.

## A Subtle Strategy

When Hubbard's swashbuckling epic was published in 1982, Scientologists immediately saw parallels to the life of its author. Some figured Hubbard had based its fair-haired hero, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler—who almost single-handedly liberates Earth from the vile Psychlos—on himself.

"This was Hubbard building his own mythology," says Gerry Armstrong, a former Hubbard aide who lost faith in the founder in 1981 and left after a dozen years on staff. "Hubbard had developed his own hagiography."

In "Battlefield Earth"—the book and the movie—Tyler takes on the head of the Psychlo security force, Terl, who lords over a mining operation on Earth. Terl rounds up humans and feeds them a diet of raw rats. He is obsessed with spying, blackmailing and manufacturing evidence to be used against his enemies. (Some who had known Hubbard and personally felt his wrath

detected traits of Hubbard in Terl, too.)

Soon after the book came out, Hubbard autographed a copy for Travolta, says former Scientology public relations official Robert Vaughn Young. "I delivered it into his hands," Young recalls. "I am sure that Hubbard wanted John to play Jonnie Goodboy Tyler. It surprised me to learn that, as it ended up, he was going to play Terl."

(This summer, at his only news conference about the movie, Travolta said he'd always wanted to be Tyler but too much time had passed. "I'm too old. . . . Imagine me, as fat as I am, running around with guns.")

No matter what Travolta's role, disaffected former Scientologists say the movie will serve to boost the church's membership and reinforce Hubbard's anti-psychiatry message. But Young—who worked as an image-builder for the church for 20 years before he became disgruntled and quit in 1989—detects a more subtle strategy.

"In one sense, John Travolta is right—this is not a book about Scientology," he says. "But it's a way for people to discover Scientology. It's a lead-in."

Scientology officials have been hoping to see "Battlefield Earth"

made into a movie since at least 1984, when they unleashed a 30-foot-high inflatable figure of Terl on Sunset Strip as part of a publicity blitz. A director was hired and auditions were held in Denver, but the project fizzled.

Around that time, Travolta first took interest in making the movie. He just didn't have the juice in Hollywood to pull it off. Over the years, the script went through about 10 revisions. In 1998 Travolta contacted Corey Mandell, a 33-year-old screenwriter who had worked with Ridley ("Blade Runner") Scott but had yet to get a script produced.

"I am not a Scientologist," Mandell declared in an interview with The Post. "I came on board because John asked me to read the book and said, 'It's not a religious book. It's a science-fiction story. There's nothing sacred about the story, nothing of the religious philosophy.'"

"I was given this to read purely as science fiction—to see whether it was intriguing as a movie. And it was."

Travolta and his longtime manager, Jonathan Krane, arranged financing and distribution. They hired Roger Christian, who had worked with George Lucas on "Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace," to direct.

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John Travolta and Madeleine Stowe in his most recent film, "The General's Daughter." When asked in an interview about the impact of the movie's gory imagery, he said psychiatric medications, not the media, cause crime.

"It's the pinnacle of using my power for something," Travolta told the New York Daily News in explaining how he came to finally make "Battlefield Earth." "I can get things done that a studio might not normally do. I told my manager, 'If we can't do the things now that we want to do, what good is the power? It's a waste, basically. Let's test it and try to get the things done that we believe in.'"

## The Secret Ingredient

At the military base in Montreal, "Battlefield Earth" crew members politely decline to be quoted. They have signed nondisclosure agreements. Beefy security men quickly affix tarps to the chain-link fence at the first sign of an unauthorized photographer. They position catering trucks to obstruct the view of a reporter.

But they can't hide everything, including props that look like they came from a '50s B-movie: old baby buggies, gas pumps, street lamps, a phone booth, rocket parts. (These items bring to mind the Marcab Confederacy, which Hubbard defined in a church dictionary as "a decadent kicked-in-the-head civilization that contains automobiles, business suits, fedora hats, telephones, spaceships.")

A Psychlo wanders by, partially costumed. He looks like Bigfoot gone Rastafarian.

"Seen any aliens?" a reporter asks a tattooed biker type guarding the gate.

"No, that guy's from Florida."

Why all the secrecy?

In part, it's just how the movie

business works these days. The studios and stars want publicity only when it suits their goals—that is, to promote a picture upon its release. Travolta usually offers scads of interviews to support his movies, but only under tightly controlled circumstances. He is among the celebs who have the leverage to handpick the writers who will interview them.

"It's not the kind of publicity we want to do right now," explains production spokeswoman Pamela Godfrey. "Your agenda and the marketing agenda for the film aren't in sync with each other. So, sorry."

The producers say they also want to make sure nobody steals their high-tech look—or their surprises. In a hotel bar in downtown Montreal where the crew is unwinding after a long day of shooting, the set's official still photographer holds up a bottle of beer.

"This is a movie," he says. "It's a product just like any other."

Consider the star to be a secret ingredient in a soon-to-be-marketed new brand of beer, says the photographer, David James, who has worked on "Saving Private Ryan" among other major releases. In this case, he says, Travolta playing a nine-foot hairy alien is the draw, certain to be a subject of worldwide fascination. "Why release the secret ingredient early?"

As for L. Ron Hubbard, James had never heard of him before he started working on this movie. "I don't even know about Christianity, let alone Scientology," James says with a wry smile, putting down the bottle of beer and holding up a tray of peanuts.

"This is a movie . . ."