



The Realism of 'Rebel Ridge'

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Some viewers of the popular Netflix film [Rebel Ridge](#) say that it's unrealistic. But a certain crucial assumption of the story is [very realistic](#) indeed.

The movie assumes that some cops are bad cops. More specifically, it assumes that bad cops often have arbitrary legal authority to do bad things. In the movie, what gets the ball rolling is the arbitrary authority conferred by America's civil forfeiture laws.

These laws permit officers to confiscate cash on your person if they merely have a suspicion, or pretend to, that the cash is ill-gotten. They needn't have evidence

that it's drug money or bank-robbery proceeds.

The suspicion is enough.

And even if you can show that the money was acquired by your own hard work and withdrawn from your bank account in pursuit of a legitimate end—buying a truck, bailing a cousin out of jail (the reason that the protagonist carries cash in *Rebel Ridge*)—that's typically not the end of it. It's rare that the law-empowered thugs who violated your property rights just say "Oops!" and hand your property right back.

J. Justin Wilson of the Institute for Justice observes another realistic portrayal of [injustice](#) in the movie, "over-detaining defendants to keep them quiet." In real life, though, [such over-detention](#) may have as much to do with bureaucratic sloth as with malice directed toward a particular prisoner.

The solution, says Wilson, is not revenge, but the kinds of legal reform IJ fights for. The movie, on the other hand, leaned more on revenge.

This is Common Sense. I'm Paul Jacob.