

Kurt Jacobsen

Fahrenheit 9/11: The Real Lowdown

by
Kurt Jacobsen

Agitprop, by any other name, is still agitprop. Even our heartiest approval of a refreshingly candid viewpoint within this dubious medium doesn't change that fact. But so what? In the trumped-up second Gulf war, didn't the mainstream U.S. media, as anchorman Dan Rather admitted with the saving grace of traces of shame, operate, as if by a tap of a wicked witch's wand, as an enormous fawning agitprop apparatus for the Bush White House? Agitprop is what every government assiduously churns out every day in calculated streams of tactical news bites, although the purveyors usually give it a suitably anodyne label, such as "public information." The disingenuous official briefings that reporters in Vietnam dubbed the "Five O'Clock Follies" have since been resurrected and refined into holy writ, especially in the watch-the-bomb-scoot-down-the-chimney cable news networks, among which Fox is only the worst offender. Can we have some whopping correctives, please?

Agitprop is customarily dismissed as politically skewed messages wrapped in the guise of art or news reporting. Yet the redoubtable Michael Moore, after a mercifully brief dalliance with presidential candidate and former NATO commander Wesley Clarke, owes no special party allegiances and loudly tells anyone who wants to know that his cunningly corrosive and hundred million dollar grossing *Fahrenheit 9/11* is damned well intended to capsize (if not abet the impeachments of) the floundering Bush administration. Most agitprop these ultra-hip days is heavily cloaked as dispassionate analysis, not as ringing calls to man the barricades or, more to the point, flock to local polling places to throw out the bums. With that infinitely affable tenacity that is his gift and trademark, Moore has become the insistent inquisitive voice of everyday Americans who wear their baseball caps unfashionably peak forward, and want to know what the hell is really going on.

In *Fahrenheit 9/11* Moore deftly strings together a chain of seamy episodes into a big picture of the media manipulation of that huge chunk of working

America informed, if that is the word, mostly by glossy TV and radio networks, or by a remarkably servile local press. You needn't peruse David Brock's *The Republican Noise Machine* or Joe Conason's *Big Lies* or anything by Robert McChesney to notice the monotonous right wing tone of U.S. airwaves—just hit “scan” on your car radio or flip through eighty-seven TV channels and find nothing (else) on news stations. An incandescent right-wing rage erupts today because Moore miraculously managed to break—maybe just sprain—the Right's grip on misreporting the news. If he accomplishes nothing else, Moore finally is getting the word out that Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with one another. The circulation of that piquant fact alone is a public service for which to smooch the ground Moore walks on. In a mass media vehicle, Bush at last wears a tall dunce's cap, and not the avenging angel's wings that his righteous supporters imagine.

The big guns were rolled out. Christopher Hitchens, in a typical deviously reasoned essay, assails *Fahrenheit 9/11* as “a sinister exercise in moral frivolity, crudely disguised as an exercise in seriousness.” For Hitchens, a born-again Bush apologist, the horde of contradictions that Moore vividly points out infest Bush's antiterrorism policy are grist to be twisted sophistically into Moore's own contradictions. Moore, for example, archly asks why so few U.S. troops were dispatched so tardily to catch bin Laden if Bush's urgent concern were really terrorism. Moore also asks what influence the Saudis, as well as other major moneybags domestic and foreign, have exerted over U.S. policy. Hitchens, therefore, asserts that either the Saudis run U.S. policy or they do not. If not, then nothing the Saudis do matters. Now there's a fine analytical mind for you. (Everything, by the way, according to Hitchens, is going swimmingly in arid Afghanistan, where nary a burqa mars the scenic landscape anymore.)

Coming into play is the twitty Brit view that only they savor the exquisiteness of irony while those perky Yanks cannot evolve beyond commonplace sarcasm. Because the pallid 9/11 Commission and Richard P. Clarke see nothing wrong with the peculiar nature of the Saudis' exit, it's okay then. Bush and Blair together are doing profound work. Iraq indeed was in noncompliance with UN resolutions, as were the U.S. and Israel, but never mind about them. There admittedly was a “bad period” when Washington preferred Saddam in the 1980s (and maybe a bit before), but, hey, that's history. Hitchens credits the rumor that Saddam dispatched agents to snuff the elder Bush. For eleven years those sanctified no-fly zones were unilaterally

imposed by Britain and the U.S., not the UN. Hitchens studiously misses any uncongenial point. Moore ridicules counterterrorism stinginess not because he craves massive spending but because the war on terror is plainly a pretext. The “matches and lighters” episode in the documentary underlines the hefty business influence upon an obliging government, at the minor cost of common sense. Blacks are happy to be in the Army, Hitchens says, because, you know, that’s what the civil rights movement was all about, although Martin Luther King might have had a word with Hitchens about this little misapprehension. He even equates Moore’s aversion to Bush with a hatred of “western democracy and an admiration of totalitarianism.” I’m not kidding. A jowly literal-mindedness smothers Hitchens, who by far is still the smartest of the multitude of critics.

WHY ALL THE FUSS? CAN A MERE DOCUMENTARY decide the next U.S. presidential election? Moore, so far as the jittery Bush administration is concerned, is one the most dangerous critters at large in America. They rightly reckon that in a close race Moore is costing Bush many vital votes in November. No documentary ever before has exerted the seditious public impact that Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* has made at the box office. If the numbers in the first few weeks are anything to go by, Moore is not just wittily preaching to the converted but reaching the shopping mall cineplex masses, a majority of whom still believe the carefully cultivated fib that Saddam Hussein instigated the 9/11 attacks. If not, then even more people may venture to ask just what was the point of the Iraq invasion and its soaring costs anyway?

Films rarely matter a whit in the real world except as money-spinning reaffirmations of conventional wisdoms and shopworn fantasies. In times of war, even undeclared wars, films reverently wave Old Glory and duly demonize the appointed foe. Commercial flicks are especially reluctant to upset popular prejudices and illusions, preferring to play along in order to attract ticket-buying crowds. Yet Moore, creator of black-humored probes *Roger & Me* and *Bowling for Columbine*, slipped past the wary gatekeepers of the corporate entertainment industry to score a sizzling success. Far scarier than routine images of slaving foreign fanatics in faraway climes lusting to cut our throats is the sneaking suspicion that our own “wartime” government is the worst enemy that ordinary Americans now have: picking your pockets, grabbing your kids for service, spying on your toilet habits, raising prices, lying prolifically, gutting the Constitution, and violating civil liberties. If “by

their deeds ye shall know them,” then no one hates our freedom more than the devious denizens of the Bush administration do.

Moore’s magical knack is capturing raw truths on screen that his audience may suspect but are too timid or unsure to say aloud. In the opening weeks of *Fahrenheit 9/11* people dashed to see his heart-achingly funny exposé of Bush’s long trail of truculent twaddle, despite original distributor Disney stupidly having balked at releasing it. *Fahrenheit 9/11* publicizes blistering facts that ought to have been in plain sight all along. Behold footage of the 2001 inauguration where Bush’s presidential stretch limo is pelted with eggs by crowds incensed at his theft of the election because of canny Florida vote-rigging, a staged “riot” of middle class Republican bullies to stop a county-level recount, and the inexcusable 5-4 decision by conservative Supreme Court appointees (two of whom should have recused themselves for having sons working for the Republican campaign) to select Bush who managed to mistake it for a coronation.

Is Moore just a simpering Democratic Party flack? Well, Moore does not shy away from displaying the spineless acquiescence of Democratic Party leaders to the 2000 electoral travesty. Not one senator of either party has the nerve to sign a demand by black congresspersons for a formal debate of certification of the 2000 election so as to address the deliberate illegitimate disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of black Florida voters, which helped hand the presidency to Bush—an outrage that has yet to be remedied. Al Gore, who chairs the proceedings, looks like a perfectly obliging fool. One can bet that, if positions were reversed, Republicans would have battled as fiercely and dirtily as possible. What is most shocking, though, is that many Americans never were informed because such scenes were withheld or underplayed by national news networks.

Still, the starkly clear news slowly dawns on bewildered Americans that there is nothing to which Bush’s band of corporate bullies, neocon firebrands, and *faux* Christian fundamentalists would not stoop for the sake of grabbing more power. Moore insinuates that it is the authoritarian urges of George W. Bush, not Osama bin Laden, that have done most to make the USA an increasingly scary and strange land for its inhabitants. With bemused distaste *Fahrenheit 9/11* charts how wealthy cronies repeatedly bailed the young feckless Bush out of business flops in order to gain precious access to his former secret policeman daddy in the White House. Bush literally was lifted into multimillionaire status through the indulgent auspices of these

influence-seeking big businessmen, and with lavish Saudi backing too. All these touchingly devoted pals deeply appreciate that there is no higher and quicker return on investment than that which can be gained through medleys of tax breaks, government contracts, and other special favors.

The supremely idealized America that John Wayne valiantly defended in a myriad of 1950s movies is long gone. Bush, the self-styled “war president,” is actually the carefree and careless National Guard pilot during Vietnam, whose closest chum in that safe branch of the service soon became a Saudi representative. Moore cites the mammoth cash flow over three decades from the Saudis to Bush’s family and friends. Moore isn’t peddling a conspiracy theory, just painting a picture of coziness. *Quid pro quo* reigns way up there in the economic stratosphere and so, just a day or two after 9/11 over a hundred members of bin Laden’s billionaire clan get spirited out of the U.S. while police were tossing less well-connected foreigners into prisons, throwing away the keys and thumbing through recycled Gestapo manuals. Why Moore even has the gall to remind viewers (not that most ever had an inkling) that bin Laden was tenderly nurtured by U.S. agencies. In the 1980s in Afghanistan, the U.S. ponied up plenty of arms and cash for bin Laden and other feudal fundamentalists because a Soviet-backed modernizing regime obviously “hated the freedom” of those sweet Afghan war lords. Bush’s backers have quite a soft spot for feudal allies.

Moore’s patented in-your-face bonhomie is downright enchanting as he collars glib U.S. politicians who squirm or sprint away as he tries to enlist their children in the Iraq war they approved. For once, their smooth glad-handedness or Olympic disdain counts against them. Far better, Moore goes after a USA Patriot Act which was nothing but a shameless compilation of devoutly desired things that closet reactionaries yearned to impose the first chance they had. Moore circles Capitol Hill in a rickety ice cream van, reading passages of this draconian legislation that our legislators signed without going through the patriotic chore of reading first.

Moore, the blue collar boy, senses very savvily what tropes will get through to his audience. His mockery of the motley crew making up the “coalition of the willing” has drawn PC squeals in some purse-lipped quarters. (Do the Dutch really need defending against a languid hash-smoking stereotype?) The archetypal shot is Bush sitting eerily, cluelessly, in a primary school classroom for what seems like eons after being told of the 9/11 attacks—the very antonym of the cool “take charge” guy his handlers project. Then there’s

Georgie boy in his nifty flight suit smirking on the carrier deck with that “Mission accomplished” banner unfurled like a tombstone inscription above. Bush’s macho threat vis-à-vis the Iraqi resistance to “smoke ‘em out” intersects with a sublime cheap shot from a musty old cowboy flick of the sort where he picked up this lugubrious B-movie expression.

Moore shows how U.S. troops, mostly trawled by sharp-eyed recruiters from neighborhoods laid waste by neglect, were dispatched to serve the interests not of the nation but of Halliburton, Unocal, and Bechtel. An Iraqi family, raided at night by a snatch squad of GIs, weeps and trembles before their new masked masters. In wavering flashlight beams, tiny children cower as another “suspect” is swept up, mostly because he fits that key criminal category: young man. Moore provides Abu Ghraib-like glimpses of routine racist mistreatment of liberated Iraqis. As Moore sadly says, “Immoral actions lead to more immoral actions.” Sordid systematic abuses are what happen when cynical elites send ignorant youngsters off to fight for trumped-up reasons. The troops righteously imagine they are exacting revenge for 9/11. A stupefying lie. But what next?

A close relative of mine is an Army combat veteran who wandered by mistake long ago into the “closed ward” of a veterans’ hospital where the unsightly cases are delicately tucked away. What he glimpsed inside left him shaken. You’d have to have seen his darting eyes as he told the tale. In *Fahrenheit 9/11* Moore unfurls the taboo images of ghastly wounds, charred corpses of U.S. mercenaries dangling on a bridge, and rows of flag-draped metal coffins. All so hush-hush. Yet even these hideous costs might be made marginally bearable if they really were necessary to ensure safety. No way. Moore’s interview with parents of a dead American soldier peels away the reflex-like obedience that passes for patriotism in many quarters of America.

The real strife, Moore rousingly sums up, is a covert class war waged on Americans by their own callous leadership. This Orwellian “endless war” stirs fears and reduces citizens to suckers for the genuine agenda, which is upholding the social hierarchy and looting rights. Why else should the police plant spies inside innocuous do-gooder groups while Bush gives bin Laden a two month head start to get away, hmm? Why does this mendacious administration, which tried to cut counterterrorism funds before 9/11, try so hard to slash money for military veterans? Oil, of course, is far too vulgar a motive for our most sophisticated minds to accept as a key reason, if not the reason, for intruding into Iraq. The scene of American firms holding a dreary

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jamboree at which to divvy up the taxpayer-funded spoils of war is a clincher. If there is a glaring omission in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, it certainly is, as left critics complain, the intimate link of Bush neocons to the truculent Israeli right wing. Is Moore really more afraid of the Israeli lobby than of the Bush administration? An interesting, even instructive, question.

Moore flatly, scandalously, openly, says “j’accuse”: that the reasons Americans are told they are fighting are hopelessly phony ones. The venerable repertoire of gimmicks that power elites rely on are not working terribly well nowadays. A CBS News/*New York Times* poll in mid-July finds a majority (51%) believe the U.S. should have left Iraq well enough alone. Almost two-third (62%) say the war has not been worth the cost. Apart from tens of thousands of dead and mutilated Iraqis, the war has exacted, at the lowball official estimates, some 900 American lives, 5,000 wounded and 250 billion dollars. Word is leaking out that the Bush people already are scrambling to contrive possible pretexts to suspend the November elections. One suspects too that there are fretful aides on their knees in the White House praying for another fundamentalist attack on the U.S.—and that a stray intergalactic meteor, dispatched by their cruel backwoods god named Mammon, strikes down Michael Moore.

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