

Hollywood enlists in Bush's war drive

By David Walsh
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“Samuel Johnson’s saying that patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels has some truth in it but not nearly enough. Patriotism, in truth, is the great nursery of scoundrels, and its annual output is probably greater than that of even religion. Its chief glories are the demagogue, the military bully, and the spreaders of libels and false history. Its philosophy rests firmly on the doctrine that the end justifies the means—that any blow, whether above or below the belt, is fair against dissenters from its wholesale denial of plain facts.”—H. L. Mencken

On November 11 more than forty top Hollywood executives met for two hours with Karl Rove, George W. Bush’s chief political advisor, to discuss ways in which the film industry could contribute to the “war on terrorism.” Here truly was a meeting of great minds!

Present were some of the most powerful figures in the motion picture industry and corporate figures whose holdings include entertainment companies, such as billionaire Sumner Redstone of Viacom Inc. (which owns Paramount, CBS and UPN). All the major studios were represented—Warner Bros., Twentieth Century Fox, Columbia Pictures, Universal Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and DreamWorks SKG—were the US television networks—ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, UPN and WB—and the film industry unions.

Rove is a right-wing ideologue and dirty trickster, one of those who played a key role in Bush’s hijacking of the presidential election last year. The film executives, most of them Democratic Party loyalists, are extravagantly paid mediocrities, in large part responsible for a seemingly endless supply of banal and vulgar products. Studio films in recent years have scrapped most traces of oppositional sentiment, except of the most anti-social and retrograde variety, and reveled in militarism, chauvinism and general reverence for all the institutions—police, church, business—of American capitalism. To ask more of Hollywood seems a daunting challenge! What further contribution could it make to the cause of conformism and political reaction?

During the two-hour meeting at the lavish Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills, Rove reportedly outlined seven themes: that the US campaign in Afghanistan is a war against terrorism, not Islam; the government’s call for “community service” should be publicized; US troops and their families need to be supported; the September 11 attacks were global attacks requiring a global response; the US campaign is a “war on evil”; the government and the film industry have the responsibility to reassure children of their safety; propaganda should be avoided.

After the meeting, following up on the last point, everyone involved hastened to assert that the Bush administration was not attempting to dictate in any fashion the content of Hollywood’s films. “The industry decides what it will do and when it will do it,” Rove told reporters. Apparently lost on the media commentators was the obvious redundancy of reassurances that the government would not impose its views in an arena where its policies find absolutely no opposition.

Rove did not elaborate on how filmmakers should grapple with the problem of a “war on evil.” He left that task to the creative minds at the film studios’ disposal. Nor did he explain how children (or anyone else) were to be made to feel safe when the government promises to conduct a war of indefinite length and scope using the entire lethal arsenal of

modern weaponry against enemies it defines as it goes along.

Jack Valenti, the long-time president of the Motion Picture Association of America and an attendee at the November 11 gathering, suggested that Hollywood’s contribution could begin with a series of public service announcements, to be broadcast in the US and abroad, making “clear to the millions of Muslims in the world that this is not an attack on Muslims—this is an attack on people who murder innocent people.”

After a previous meeting on October 17 between lower-level Bush administration figures and Hollywood executives, right-wing producer Lionel Chetwynd commented, “There was a feeling around the table that something is wrong if half the world thinks we’re the Great Satan, and we want to make that right. There’s a genuine feeling that we as Americans are failing to get our message across to the world.” That the US is seen as an oppressor by “half the world” is a remarkable admission and a reality that is not likely to be cleared up by a round of public service announcements.

The film studio executives assembled on November 11 responded enthusiastically to Rove’s appeal. Sherry Lansing, Paramount Pictures chairwoman, told the media following the meeting, “All of us have this incredible need, this incredible urge to do something.”

The “incredible need” and “incredible urge” to go along with the Bush administration’s campaign of lies and propaganda has apparently been felt by virtually the entire film industry. Not a single leading figure has been capable of condemning the terror attacks in New York and Washington and at the same time opposing the slaughter in Afghanistan and the sweeping assault on democratic rights in the US.

The universal response among Hollywood’s “left” (i.e., tepid liberal Democrats) has been to drop all criticism of George W. Bush and throw in their lot with the war drive. Not one of these stalwarts can apparently find it in himself or herself to resist the tide of media-driven right-wing opinion. There is nothing so terrifying for an American “celebrity” as the thought of being excluded from the limelight and facing even temporary isolation. There is a certain logic to these fears: how much would be left of most of these people if the element of celebrity were removed?

From the point of view of the film studio executives, as Jon Friedman of *CBS.MarketWatch.com* put it, the “big challenge now is figuring out how it can look like a do-gooder [i.e., toe the Bush line politically] while it actually focuses on its ongoing obsession: making money.” Tom Pollock, former vice chairman of MCA, bluntly told a panel at the recent New York Film Festival: “We live in a capitalist society, and what motivates the studios is making money.”

Hollywood has been notoriously poor in recent years at predicting popular tastes. It has managed to satisfy or please almost no one with its increasingly bland and bombastic works. Whichever direction, or combination of directions, the studios choose to take—ever lighter fare, patriotic and nationalistic rubbish, moral uplift—the further degeneration of their products is virtually guaranteed.

(It should be noted, along these lines, that the inimitable Sylvester Stallone, whose last film success no one can or probably wants to remember, has reportedly been considering reviving his Rambo persona and taking on the Taliban in a new film, skydiving into Afghanistan to

challenge terrorism. This could have unfortunate consequences as it might stir up memories of *Rambo III* (1988), in which Stallone's one-man army fought against the Soviet army in Afghanistan alongside the Mujaheddin, described as "freedom fighters"—in other words, *as an ally of Osama bin Laden*—in a work generally described as unintentionally hilarious.)

Films made under the conditions Rove and his friends in the film industry envision, more or less on orders from a warmongering ruling elite out for world domination, cannot possibly have serious artistic or human value. Meaningful works will increasingly be those that are made in the teeth of official disapproval and on the basis of a thought-out criticism of the entire social order, including its ideology, its morals and its art.

The attempt to align Hollywood more closely with the political and ideological needs of the American ruling elite did not begin on September 11, despite the claims of various superficial observers. For example, Bernard Weinraub in the *New York Times* ("The Moods They Are A'Changing In Films; Terrorism Is Making Government Look Good") suggests that "For more than 30 years, a staple of popular culture in movies, books and television has been the depiction of the government as a hostile, corrupt, even evil force spinning elaborate conspiracies to manipulate and suppress Americans. ... By every account, the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, and the war being waged against Afghanistan, has changed the way the entertainment industry portrays the government, at least for the moment." Not to be outdone, Deborah Solomon advanced the same notion in the *Times* in relation to the visual arts in "Once Again, Patriotic Themes Ring True as Art."

This claim, that "everything changed" on September 11, is belied by Weinraub's own account. He notes that several television series about the CIA and other intelligence agencies were scheduled to air this autumn, and that "Even before the terrorist attacks, entertainment executives and academics had noted a new patriotism and support for government in popular culture." He refers to Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, the action films *Air Force One* and *Independence Day*, the "Band of Brothers" television series and books by Stephen Ambrose and Tom Brokaw, as well as "The West Wing," about "a decent and liberal president who serves as a sort of father figure to his staff members."

The steady rightward movement of prominent filmmakers and others in the arts and entertainment field is one aspect of a generalized social trend: the lurch to the right by privileged layers of the upper middle class, increasingly isolated from and hostile to the working population. It is not for nothing that the policeman, in one guise or another, has become an almost omnipresent protagonist on television and cinema screens. Instinctively, film producers, writers and directors seek to flatter and idealize one of the principal social types to whom they entrust the task of defending their wealth and position.

It was not always thus. As Weinraub indicates, "Throughout the 1960s and 70s, the anti-government fervor accelerated. The Nixon presidency, its collapse, and the end of the war in Indochina made it improbable, if not unthinkable, to release films that depicted the government—or the establishment—in positive ways." He refers to such works as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Three Days of the Condor*, *The Graduate*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Chinatown*, *The Godfather* and *A Clockwork Orange*, and at a later date, *J.F.K.* One might add *All the President's Men* and *The Parallax View*, as well as—for their warning about the threat represented by the military high command—films like *Seven Days in May* and *Fail Safe*. And there are many others, in a general anti-establishment vein, including Robert Altman's work in the 1970s, the films of John Cassavetes and certain early films by Martin Scorsese.

The above-mentioned films were hardly all works of genius, nor did they necessarily demonstrate great social insight. Nonetheless they sought, in one way or another, to examine American life in a critical fashion. Weinraub makes the extraordinary comment: "With the

exception *The Godfather*, such movies would probably not be today because they would be seen as too dark, too downbeat." If Weinraub is correct (and he probably is), what a devastating indictment of the American film studios!

There has been some discussion in the press of the possibility or advisability of reproducing "the kind of intensive collaboration Hollywood had with Washington during World War II, when acclaimed filmmakers such as Frank Capra created inspirational movies and documentaries on the conflict" (*Washington Post*). Capra produced and directed a seven-part film series, *Why We Fight* (1942-45), for screening to US troops.

Capra's series was unabashed propaganda, but it appealed to and played upon the democratic instincts of those who had joined the military to take up a struggle against fascism. It could, in other words, tell at least a portion of the truth. For example, in Part 2—*The Nazis Strike*—the filmmakers examined the growth and ambitions of the Nazi movement, its military buildup and conquest of eastern Europe. *The Battle for Russia* (Part 5) was obliged to pay tribute to the titanic resistance of the Soviet people and the Red Army, which had "shattered the whole legend of Nazi invincibility."

How would Hollywood approach the same theme today? Perhaps *Why We Fight in Afghanistan* could begin with the Unocal or Halliburton logo flashed on the screen. In any event, a serious discussion of the origins of the Taliban or the recent history of Afghanistan, impossible without examining the role of the US in fomenting and financing Islamic fundamentalism, would be entirely out of bounds. Any film produced today on the conflict in Afghanistan would be nothing but a tissue of lies and apologies for barbarism.

The basis for the sort of democratic-patriotic appeal made during World War II has not simply been undercut by the openly predatory character of American interventions overseas, but also by the transformed social relations within the US. The creation of a deeply polarized society, in which vast wealth is possessed by a brazen handful, has undermined patriotic sentiment. The power of appeals to the traditions of the American Revolution and the Civil War depended, in the final analysis, on the ability of the population to improve its living standards and the maintenance of what one might call a generally democratic atmosphere, one that at least encouraged the notion that the people had some say in political affairs. The open consolidation of American oligarchic rule has put paid to all that. Subsequent events will demonstrate how shallow the reserve of patriotism has become in the US.

Even the *New York Times*' Clyde Haberman was obliged to note that the government's manipulative conduct in regard to the war effort in Afghanistan insured that "finding a latter-day Frank Capra may not be easy. ... Essentially, all that the American public knows is what the government wants it to know. Some critics ask if the line between information and propaganda has been uncomfortably blurred."

In the long run the result of the present rush by the film and music industries to throw themselves at the feet of the imperialist politicians in Washington, D.C. will be a salutary one. A great deal of dead wood will be sorted out: overrated screen idols of both sexes, rock and roll stars that no one cares about any more, a legion of hack directors and writers, assorted hangers-on. Those who adopt the aims and insatiable appetites of the US ruling elite as their own will sooner or later become the objects of popular scorn and disgust. Their appearance will coincide with their essence: human zeroes.

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