

Michael Moore's contribution

By David Walsh
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This review is available as a PDF leaflet to download and distribute Fahrenheit 9/11, written and directed by Michael Moore

The release of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* has provided great numbers of people in the US the opportunity to demonstrate their opposition to the war in Iraq, the policies of the Bush administration and their general disgust with the political and media establishment. More than three million people viewed the film in its first weekend in the theaters, by all accounts overwhelmingly approving its message.

The opening of Moore's film in North America has been a genuine political event, not a stage-managed one. This in itself is rare in a country where official political life has been for decades thoroughly scripted, running in the narrowest of channels.

For many people, buying a movie ticket has suddenly become a means of making a public statement of dissent. It turns out, contrary to the official mythology, that millions in the US passionately oppose the criminal policies of their government.

That is not a small matter. The response to *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a shattering exposure of the American media and its leading personalities. The massive turnout at the box office—unprecedented for a non-fiction film—gives the lie to the claims about the popularity of the “war president” and his regime. Abraham Lincoln was right—you can't fool all of the people all of the time.

How did the media “miss” the fact that there was mass opposition to the war? Why was it denied and concealed, even after the huge demonstrations of February 2003, until the record-breaking turnout to Moore's film has now made it an obvious fact of national life? How did the media, including the “liberal” media, “miss” the fact that Bush was a reactionary cipher, a moral eunuch, whose every word and deed served the interests of the corporate elite?

The popular outpouring confirms that a radicalization is under way in the US, with far-reaching implications.

And the millions who have flocked to the movie theaters have not gone for nothing, they have not been duped. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is an admirable film, remarkable in certain parts, done with considerable and heart-felt sincerity. Moore is a gifted filmmaker who displays intuition, energy and courage.

Even in considering the weaknesses of the film, which are also real and significant, one has to place them in a certain context. If *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for example, attempts to cover too much ground, if it touches on too many issues and not any one of them in sufficient depth, can one blame Moore entirely? After all, if the US media, with all its vast resources and technology, were treating events with a modicum of honesty, would there be such a gaping hole that Moore clearly feels he has to fill up single-handedly? Would he feel the need to cover *everything*, if the official news media had been investigating and exposing *anything*?

Right-wing critics attack Moore for his supposed “egoism” and propensity for “self-aggrandizement.” These reactionaries are simply infuriated that the filmmaker has the audacity to take on the powers that be when so many others have been intimidated or bribed. His stance has helped reveal that a vast social constituency has been suppressed and unable to express itself.

The journalistic wing of the American intelligentsia in particular is largely a cesspool of venality and corruption. The principal task the US media has set itself in recent years has been concealment, its inventiveness largely devoted to finding means of preventing the population from discovering the truth about its government and society.

That a war of outright aggression could be launched, which has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands and with as-yet-unknown and potentially catastrophic repercussions, based on a series of transparent lies, without a *single major voice* in the American media raised against it—this is a crime for which the media moguls and their highly million-dollar anchormen and anchorwomen and columnists deserve to be answerable.

And even some of Moore's political difficulties, the refusal to break with the Democratic Party, the populist pandering, the obsession with Bush as an individual, ought to be seen in context. Large sections of the liberal-left milieu in the US in recent years have simply thrown in the towel, enriching themselves, turning to the right, exhibiting an increasing indifference about the fate of broad layers of the population. In this sense, Moore is something of an isolated figure. He retains a feeling and a genuine sympathy for the plight of the oppressed.

Moore (*Roger & Me, Bowling for Columbine*) opens his film with a pre-credit sequence dedicated to the hijacking of the 2000 elections by the Bush camp and the refusal of Democratic candidate Al Gore and his party to resist the theft. Bush takes office, despite protests, and promptly goes on vacation.

After a few shots of the new administration's officials putting their public faces on, the screen goes black and we hear the sounds of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, then see the horrified faces of those watching from the streets below. Extraordinary footage of George W. Bush follows. After being informed of the second aerial suicide attack on the World Trade Center, the president of the United States continues sitting in a classroom and reads a children's book for another seven minutes, looking like a man who does not know what to do.

Moore explains correctly that the Bush administration in the wake of September 11 deliberately set out to create the impression in the popular mind that the Saddam Hussein regime was implicated in the terrorist assault, although no such connection existed and Iraq had never attacked the US.

An extended sequence of the film then treats the wide-ranging links between the Bush family and the Saudi ruling elite. These connections are real and significant, and the general argument that US foreign policy is driven by material interests—oil, profits and greed—is certainly a healthy antidote to the drivel about “liberating” Iraq and bringing “democracy” to the Middle East, but Moore strikes his most truly false note in this section.

Fahrenheit 9/11 essentially portrays the Saudis as the master manipulators and even controllers of the Bush administration. This is simply wrongheaded. The suggestion that “rich Arabs” are taking over the country or have undue influence will not help raise the political-cultural consciousness of the US population. American imperialism is ruthless, criminal and predatory. The Saudi monarchy is a caretaker and puppet of US interests, not an independent actor, no matter

how vast its wealth.

The director here has taken the line of least resistance, succumbing to the lure of the easy explanation, rather than providing a more profound analysis. This is not the only such short cut taken in *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

After providing his version of the background to the September 11 attacks, including revealing shots of Taliban officials visiting the US as part of an attempt to work out a pipeline deal, Moore proceeds quite forthrightly to expose the Bush administration's efforts to use the tragic deaths in New York and Washington for its own sinister political purposes.

The USA Patriot Act, passed by Congress, introduced many repressive measures long sought by the ultra-right and law enforcement agencies. Democratic Congressman Jim McDermott (Washington) notes that September 11 was "the chance to do something" and the Bush administration took full advantage, unleashing an unprecedented attack on democratic rights, with the full participation of the Democrats in Congress. Moore details some of the more preposterous actions taken by the FBI against entirely law-abiding citizens.

Fahrenheit 9/11 graphically depicts the consequences of the launching of a war of aggression against Iraq in March 2003: the corpses of young Iraqi children (juxtaposed with the insufferable Donald Rumsfeld boasting about "the care, the humanity, that goes into our conduct of this war"), devastated families, terrified women and children in a house invaded by US troops in the dead of night. The film succinctly exposes the litany of Bush administration lies about weapons of mass destruction and alleged Iraqi-Al Qaeda links. It furthermore indicts the Democratic Party leadership for endorsing the war and the American mass media for transmitting the government's lies without criticism or questioning.

The strongest sections of the film are unquestionably those shot in Moore's hometown of Flint, Michigan. The director returns to what he knows best. Here the film takes on a different character and rises above the level of much of "left" middle class commentary. Here the critical social and class questions emerge in a sharp and persuasive fashion.

We learn that Flint, once home to thousands of jobs at auto giant General Motors, now has a real unemployment rate of 50 percent. One young man explains that televised images of a bombed Iraqi city remind him of his neighborhood. The shots of boarded-up homes and devastated, poverty-stricken neighborhoods bear him out.

Fahrenheit 9/11 makes the case that those who join the "volunteer" US military are, in fact, economic conscripts, forced by desperate circumstances to put their lives at risk in hope of receiving education or job training. Moore asks a group of black youth how many have relatives in the military. Nearly everyone raises his hand.

In one of the most revealing sequences, two Marine recruiters cynically trawl a shopping center in an impoverished part of town for likely recruits or even anyone who can be duped into leaving his name and address.

Moore pays attention as well to the moral and mental state of the troops sent to Iraq. His picture is complex enough: we see US soldiers terrorizing Iraqi civilians, abusing and humiliating prisoners and demonstrating psychotic behavior ("It's the ultimate rush," says one US soldier, when you listen to a heavy metal tune during a raid), all this the inevitable consequence of brutal and brutalizing colonial warfare. We also see those who are reflecting on their situation and their own actions, who feel guilt and shame. One young soldier tells the camera: "Part of your soul is destroyed in taking another life." Another says, "If Rumsfeld were here, I'd ask for his resignation."

Horrorific scenes from Walter Reed medical center in Washington of American Iraqi war veterans, mostly kids, without legs or hands or arms, are intercut with images of a beaming Bush addressing a fund-raiser full of fat cats, declaring to thunderous laughter and applause, "This is a gathering of the haves and the have-mores. Some call you the elite, but I call you my base."

A conference on the profits to be amassed from the conflict in Iraq brings together corporate jackals, large and small. "There are billions and billions of dollars to be made," they are reminded from the podium. The war, observes one participant, is "good for business, bad for the people."

Fahrenheit 9/11 captures a heartbreaking reality. As part of his research into economic conditions in Flint, Moore interviews Lila Lipscomb of Career Alliance, a job-training and workforce development agency. A self-described "conservative Democrat" and a flag-waving patriot, Lipscomb has a son in the military in Iraq. When we first meet her, she fully supports the war.

By the time we encounter Lipscomb again, tragedy has struck. Her son has been killed in action in Iraq. In an unflinching and honest manner, Lipscomb begins to examine her previously unthinking patriotism and faith in the administration, increasingly aware of the government's dishonesty in taking the country into war. Outside the White House, she confronts a war supporter who accuses Moore of staging Lipscomb's encounter with an Iraqi woman protester.

In a final scene, Lipscomb reads from her son's last letter, denouncing the war, "What in the world's wrong with Bush, trying to be like his dad?... I really hope they do not re-elect that guy." Her husband asks rhetorically, "[He died] for what? For what?" The scene is deeply moving.

In the final voice-over, Moore returns powerfully to the social questions, reiterating the point about the sons and daughters of the working class having to conduct a war that benefits only the wealthy. He concludes with a citation from British left-wing author George Orwell, which contains these passages: "The war is not meant to be won, but it is meant to be continuous.... The hierarchy of society is only possible on the basis of poverty and ignorance. In principle, the war effort is always planned to keep society on the brink of starvation. The war is waged by the ruling group against its own subjects, and its object is not victory...but to keep the very structure of society intact."

Fahrenheit 9/11, in short, ends with a fierce condemnation of the capitalist system—although the words are not used—and the manner in which it regulates social tensions in part through imperialist war. This is extraordinary material for a film that has a mass audience—indeed, for any contemporary film. A domestic box office of \$100 million, a figure now being bandied about, would translate into some 15 million viewers in the US, or approximately 1 in 15 people over the age of 14. No wonder that certain maddened right-wingers are urging that cinemas showing the film be blockaded.

At its best, Moore's film articulates and can only deepen the social anger building up in America and which must find political expression, although perhaps not in the manner that the filmmaker himself might advocate.

In interviews, Michael Moore repeatedly emphasizes that he is an artist and a filmmaker first and foremost. This is generally interpreted as a disingenuous or evasive remark. Perhaps it is an attempt in part to avoid being accused of taking a partisan position on the current election campaign and thus compromising attempts to reach a wide audience with his film, but the documentarian, inadvertently or not, has hit upon an important issue.

As a politician and commentator, Moore has been woefully inconsistent. He vacillates, for example, between strident denunciations of the Democrats for their lack of backbone and appeals to its traditional supporters to "retake" the party. His support earlier this year for the candidacy of former army general Wesley Clark, the commander of NATO forces in its brutal assault on Serbia, for the Democratic presidential nomination was entirely deplorable—this was Moore at his weakest, his most pragmatic, his most unthinking.

As an honest artist, however, Moore is compelled to go beyond the limitations of his conscious political outlook. Image-making has that

quality. This is not a film that provides aid and comfort to the leadership of the Democratic Party. In searchingly examining the history of the past four years, Moore reveals the Democrats as largely complicit in a bipartisan strategy, indeed a ruling elite consensus, aimed at establishing US global hegemony.

Looking honestly at Flint and such communities, Moore is compelled to acknowledge or imply that for American working class youth there is no future within the present economic and social order. Beyond that, he argues convincingly that imperialist war takes advantage of poverty to find its cannon fodder and, at the same time, serves as a safety valve to suppress the class struggle at home. The implications of these insights are revolutionary.

Of course, in creating a work that directly treats political and historical matters, the artist, even the honest artist, cannot entirely overcome his limitations. Unresolved questions will inevitably find their way into the artistic product. And this is the case with Moore's film.

A tension exists in *Fahrenheit 9/11* between the sober and thoughtful tone of the Flint sequences and some of the more superficial, irritatingly jocular, almost sophomoric moments. A tension exists between a deep sympathy for the working population in America and an opportunist orientation to the miserably compromised "liberal" wing of the Democrats, one of the two big-business parties in America. A tension exists between socialist convictions, hostile to all forms of national and ethnic chauvinism, and American populist demagoguery, tinged with nativist prejudice.

One of the difficulties with *Fahrenheit 9/11* is that from the methodological and aesthetic point of view, it ends where it should have begun. It's not the exaggerated focus on Saudi Arabia and the Bush family fortunes that is most telling, but the scenes in America, in Michigan. The horrors in Iraq are not principally the product of Bush's personal greed and stupidity, as real as those are; they express the social contradictions of American society as a whole.

Lacking in Moore's film ultimately is a more seriously considered and consistent analysis of *the type of society* out of which something as monstrous as the Iraq war could possibly have emerged. The political personnel in charge of lying and finding rationales for imperialist invasion at any given instant is a secondary matter. Bush, Gore or John Kerry—the drive for US world domination will continue. The personal demonization of Bush can become a means of evading the critical question: the historic and systemic bankruptcy of American capitalism, at which Moore's film is forthright enough to hint.

The filmmaker's dilemma is not merely his own. Moore passed through the bitter experiences of the working class population in Flint, repeated throughout the US, in the 1970s and 1980s: the vast downsizing, the abandonment of workers to their fate by the trade unions, the devastating economic, social and moral consequences. The limitations of that experience and his own limitations are bound up with unresolved political problems facing the American working class, including the character of the unions, the nature of the Democratic Party, the historic role of liberalism.

Where does Moore go from here? In our view, his further evolution as an artist will largely depend on his intellectual and political development. In the first place, this will mean an open admission of his underlying socialist convictions. A frank and thoroughgoing critique of American capitalism is unavoidable if the filmmaker is not to repeat himself, or worse, fall backward and find his work used for purposes antithetical to his most deeply held convictions.

Moore has obviously done a considerable amount of reading and thinking, and on that basis made a crucial advance with this film. He has come very far. One hopes he can resolve the tensions in his thought and his art.

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