

Angry Humor Spews Awful Truth

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Film Reviews of

Bowling for Columbine and **Fahrenheit 9/11**

by Michael Moore

Bowling for Columbine

Tagline: 'Are we a nation of gun nuts or are we just nuts?'

Released: 2002

Director, Writer, Producer: Michael Moore

MPAA rating: R for some violent images and language

Running time: 120 minutes

Sound Mix: Dolby Digital



The searing narrative of this provocative and highly controversial film travels from the psychological to the socio-political, from the serious to the comic, crisscrossing paradigms and textual frames, as it does the genres of drama, documentary, and comedy, in its attempt to present the big picture.

It is not specifically about Columbine, nor is it specifically about bowling. Neither is it specifically a documentary about gun violence in America. In fact, if Moore-basher David T. Hardy were to be believed, it is not specifically even a documentary – although it did win the Best Documentary Feature at the 2002 Oscars, giving Moore the opportunity to trounce the Bush Administration before a startled audience in black tie and evening gown.

Bowling for Columbine is Moore's impressionistic rendition, in broad strokes of angry humor, of the link between the *paranoid mentality* of gun-loving Americans and the violent nature of post-Cold War US foreign policy. "An honest expression of what I see and believe," the maverick filmmaker says. This link derives from what author Barry Glassner dubs as the "Culture of Fear", nurtured by the vested interests of media, powerful corporations, and elite politicians.

According to Stuart Jeffries (in *The Guardian*, May 17, 2002), Moore was working on a segment for his TV series, *The Awful Truth*, days before the shootings at Columbine. This segment featured *Teen Sniper School*, where a weapons instructor taught children how to fire guns. What happened in Columbine on April 20, 1999 apparently triggered his decision to make a full-blown documentary, the rough cut of which ran for some six hours.

On that day, based on timelines drawn by the Sheriff's Office of Jefferson County, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, who at 6:00 AM had attended bowling class that would earn them P. E. credits at Columbine High School, drove into campus armed with four guns and several knives and explosives. After the smoke cleared early afternoon, 12 students – including the gunmen, who had turned the guns on themselves – and one teacher, lay dead. Dozens of others were wounded.

Among the sub-themes Moore explores in his film are the following: how the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution (i.e., the right to bear arms) is experienced today, and what people feel and think about their guns; America's aggressive foreign policy; responses to Columbine; historical roots of fear and violence in America; media's propagation of fear and consumption; and a comparison of American and Canadian cultures vis-à-vis coping with conflict.

Using the novelty of reality TV, Moore launches his narrative by opening a bank account at North County Bank & Trust. He gets, as incentive for the account, a free rifle. The bank, in fact, doubles as a licensed firearms dealer, and keeps in its vault 500 firearms in anticipation of brisk savings and investment. The transaction is so simple and matter-of-fact that it becomes bizarre. Moore quips before exiting the scene: "Don't you think it's a little dangerous hanging out with guns in a bank?"

Not that Moore is queasy about guns. He was born in a state that advertises guns galore, where everyone loves hunting, and where one can buy ammunition even in a barber shop – the State of Michigan. Moore, a lifetime member of the NRA (National Rifle Association), was marksman champion as a teenager. His obsession with guns was cultivated early in childhood. The NRA president, the actor Charlton Heston, also comes from Michigan.

Moore takes us on a personal journey into the past and, from there, into the training ground of the Michigan militia in the present. A militiaman offers to explain why he is carrying a gun: "This is an American tradition. It's an American responsibility to be armed. If you're not armed, you're not responsible. Who's going to defend your kids? The cops? The federal government? It's your job to defend you and yours. If you don't do it, you're in dereliction of duty – as an American. Period."

Members of the Michigan militia whose names may have recall are Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. They blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, killing 116 people. McVeigh was executed, while Nichols got a life sentence. James Nichols, Terry's brother, was also arrested in connection with the bombing, but was later released on grounds of insufficient evidence. He is now an organic farmer growing soy beans on their farm in Decker, Michigan, where he, his brother, and McVeigh once made practice bombs.

James Nichols, who sleeps with a .44 magnum under his pillow, still harbors a smoldering grudge against the US government: "If the people find out how they've been ripped off and enslaved by this government, by the powers that be, they will revolt with anger – merciless anger. There'll be blood running in the streets. When the government turns too radical, it's your duty to overthrow it."

He believes, however, that nuclear weapons should be restricted, that these should not be allowed to run loose in private homes. “There are wackos out there,” he warns with eyes ablaze.

Across the bay from the Nichols farm is Oscoda, still in Michigan. Two teenagers are playing pool. Reflects Brent, who got kicked out of school because he pulled a 9-mm on a kid he had a beef with: “Oscoda has a bad habit of raising psychos. Bad habit . . .” His pool partner, DJ, is a self-made bomb-maker. An avid reader of *The Anarchist’s Cookbook*, he prides himself for having once made five gallons of napalm. But Brent was not referring to himself or his partner. He was referring to Eric Harris, one of the Columbine shooters, who had spent part of his childhood living with his father on the Air Force base in Oscoda. His father flew planes during the Gulf War. Of all the bombs dropped in that war, 20% were dropped by planes from Oscoda.

As a result of the Columbine incident, Lockheed Martin Corporation, a.k.a. ‘We are Columbine’, donated \$100,000 toward anger management training in Jefferson County public schools. When Moore asks a company spokesman why the biggest employer in town makes missiles in response to conflict, he replies that the missiles are mainly for self-defense, echoing the sentiment of common gun-owners.

At this point, Moore wedges into the narrative a brief rundown of American aggression in foreign lands to the whimsical tune of *Wonderful World*. The segment starts with the overthrow in 1953 of Prime Minister Mossadeq of Iran in favor of the Shah, and ends with the destruction of the twin towers in New York, attributed to CIA-trained Osama bin Laden. Its underlying message: *What goes ‘round comes back*.

As a result of the Columbine incident, schools nationwide adopted a Zero Tolerance policy. Children and teenagers alike were suspended or punished for all sorts of minor infractions, such as carrying a nail clipper to school, pointing a strip of chicken wire or a folded piece of paper at a teacher, dyeing one’s hair blue, wearing a Scottish kilt, or talking in jest about little plots of their own.

As in the days of Joe McCarthy, witch-hunting became a favorite pastime. And shocker rocker Marilyn Manson, since he looked very much like a modern-day witch in costume and make-up, became “Poster Boy for Fear”, the embodiment of bad influences supposedly generated by an angry heavy metal sub-culture.

Moore chats with Manson, whose concert was being targeted for boycott by indignant, self-righteous rabble rousers. The latter’s appraisal of the situation is far saner than the frenzy of clichés offered over media as explanations. Apparently stricken by German musicologist-philosopher Adorno, Manson views violence and entertainment as by-products of media’s campaign of fear and consumption. The more people fear, the more they buy products and services to allay their fear.



Director Moore goes to Wal-Mart and buys bullets. (Retrieved from <http://www.bowlingforcolumbine.com/media/gallery/photo-all.php?Photo=08> on February 4, 2005.)

Or, as the producers of the TV series *Cops*, may put it: “...Anger does well, hate does well, violence does well...”

It is not only advertising and entertainment that engender fear but the evening news as well. Moore illustrates how the news media, with its flair for drama and choice of coverage (e.g., Y2K scare, killer or *Africanized* bees, bacteria outbreak, razor blades in apples at Halloween, bone-crunching escalators), not to mention parasitic feeding on issues, could not help but instill in people the feeling that: “America still seems like a very scary place...”

Arthur Busch, country prosecutor of Flint, Michigan could not agree more: “Network TV and local news want people to believe that their communities are much more dangerous than they actually are. For example, in this community, crime has decreased every year for the past eight years, yet gun ownership, particularly handgun ownership, is on the increase.”

Moore traces the genesis of fear through a South Park-style cartoon animation, executed by Harold Moss from Moore’s script, which suggests that the country was born out of fear of outsiders that runs to this day – a fear that leads to acts of violence, influencing virtually all and sundry up to the top echelons of government. This *revisionist history* of America runs, in part, as follows:

The genesis of fear in America came from having a slave population that in just 86 years from the time of the revolutionary war in 1775 to the civil war in 1861 grew from 700,000 to 4 million. In parts of the rural south, blacks outnumbered whites by a three to one margin and there were a lot of slave rebellions. So in 1836 Samuel Colt invented the six-shooter...

The United States remains the most notorious for gun violence compared to other countries with similar violent pasts, violent entertainment, easy accessibility to guns, and pockets of poverty. Its neighbor, Canada, for example, where guns are also easily accessible, prefers to settle conflict through negotiation. In Canada, where the evening news is clearly delineated from entertainment, violent or otherwise, people sleep easy and keep their doors unlocked.

Moore attempts an explanation with this film.

In his eagerness to surface the essence of events, Moore may have manipulated certain historical data and elements in his narrative in favor of message impact, including putting unwary interviewees, like Charlton Heston, in a tight spot. Inevitably, these tactics have prompted Moore-basher Hardy to decree that *Bowling for Columbine* is “deliberately, seriously, and consistently deceptive”.

But if hundreds of teachers and students voted it Best Film in the 2002 Cannes Prix Educational National People’s Prize competition, not to mention that it received a 13-minute standing ovation and the 55th Anniversary Prize at the main Cannes Film Festival competition, then there must certainly be some truth in Moore’s rendition.

Fabrenheit 9/11

Tagline: ‘Was it all just a dream?

Did the last four years not happen?’

Released: 2004

Director, Writer, Producer: Michael Moore

MPAA rating: R for some violent images and language

Running time: 120 minutes

Sound Mix: Dolby Digital



Armed to the teeth with 34 pages of factual back-up in anticipation of criticism similar to that leveled against his earlier documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore, once more in characteristic comedic fashion, but this time piecing together real people, real places, and real events, creates a masterpiece of investigative journalism – a Divine Exposé of dramatic proportion and consequence – which he calls *Fabrenheit 9/11*.

Fabrenheit 9/11 is a story no other man would have dared to tell (aside, perhaps, from Osama bin Laden and Dante Alighieri). It is the story of a man who became president, and is president still of the most powerful nation in the world despite his Administration’s curious actions and inactions in the wake of that apocalyptic September.

In a surrealistic prologue, amid a night sky lit by fireworks, presidential candidate Al Gore is celebrating his victory in Florida, Ground Zero of the 2000 Presidential elections. Results of elections in this state would decide which candidate was going to be the 43rd President of the United States.

There was, of course, much cause for celebration. NBC, from information provided by the Voters News Service (VNS), had projected Gore winner in Florida. This was at 7:48 PM. By 7:50 PM, CNN and CBS had followed suit, and by 8:02 PM, all five networks and the Associated Press had called it for Gore. Even VNS had, by this time, openly projected victory for Gore. So there was much to be thankful for that evening in Gore's camp. Victory was at hand despite the fact that thousands of people, disproportionately black, who were likely to vote in favor of Gore, had been disenfranchised due to a bungled overhaul of Florida's voter registration records. The Florida Department of State had awarded a \$4-million contract to Database Technologies, Inc. for this overhaul.

Then, before dawn's early light, at 2:16 AM the following day, Fox News Channel called it for Bush in Florida. Other networks dutifully followed, with ABC calling last. AP and VNS did not retract their earlier projections.

In this prologue, Moore considers the role of good, old family ties in American politics. Running the election desk as consultant at Fox was John Ellis, first cousin to George Walker Bush. Ellis, who was once prevailed upon by editors of the *Boston Globe* to stop writing about the campaign in their paper because of family 'loyalty,' admits that he was in touch throughout the night with Cousin George and his brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, but denies breaking any rules.

George W. Bush, of course, appreciates the value of family, too, particularly when it comes to doing business. In an August 1992 interview, he stresses this quite clearly: "When you're the President's son, you've got unlimited access. Combined with some credentials from our prior campaign, in Washington, D. C., people can respect that. Access is power. And I can find my dad and talk to him anytime of the day."

Bush's dubious victory in Florida and, consequently, his dubious assumption to office as President of the United States — his inauguration was attended by tens of thousands of protestors shouting slogans like 'Hail to the Thief' and 'Selected, Not Elected' — was made even more dubious by the fact that the vote total in Florida was certified, on behalf of Governor Jeb Bush, by Florida's secretary of state, Katherine Harris, who headed the Bush campaign in the state.

Fabrenheit 9/11 is the story of the dealings of two generations of Bushes and their friendship with Saudi businessmen.

In 1976, shortly after George H.W. Bush or Bush Senior was appointed director of the CIA, Saudi Sheik Salem M. bin Laden, heir to the second largest fortune in Saudi Arabia, appointed James Reynolds Bath to be his business representative in Texas. The Sheik had bought a sluggish medium-range plane from Bath two years earlier, and apparently came to trust the fellow – at least, this may have been his story. Was it just a coincidence then that Bath was a close friend of George W. Bush or Bush Junior? The two had hit it off while doing service together in the Texas Air National Guard. Both were eventually suspended from flying for failure to take a medical examination. Inevitably, part of what the Sheik gave Bath to manage went to the business interests of Bush.

With the help of James A. Baker's law partner, Robert Jordan, whom he later appointed ambassador to Saudi Arabia when he became President, Bush beat the rap the SEC was planning for him for selling shares of stock in Harken Energy Co. a few months before it reported significant losses. After his great escape, his father's friends got him a seat on the Board of CaterAir, a company owned by the Carlyle Group.

The Carlyle Group, by Moore's account, is a "multinational conglomerate that invests in heavily government-regulated industries like telecommunications, healthcare, and, particularly, defense." As one of the world's largest equity firms, it has more than \$18.3 billion under management.

Under the leadership of ex-government officials like James Baker and former Defense Secretary Frank C. Carlucci, the conglomerate developed a knack in buying defense companies and doubling or quadrupling their value. It owned, among others, United Defense, makers of the Bradley armored fighting vehicle. According to Moore, "Just six weeks after 9/11, Carlyle filed to take United Defense public, and, in December, made a one-day profit of \$237 million."

In the mid-1990s, Bush Senior had joined up with the Carlyle Group and became a member of the company's Asia Advisory Group, drawing in investors, including 12 rich Saudi families, the bin Ladens among them. At least \$1.46 billion flowed from Saudi to the 'House of Bush' and allied companies, which included investments made and contracts awarded at the time Bush Senior's friends were involved with the Carlyle Group.

The Carlyle Group thus became a deep cause for concern, as it was mixing private business with public policy. It had directors and advisors making money from all parts of the world, while advising, on the side, the President of the United States.

Among those in a meeting of the Carlyle Group on the morning of September 11, 2001 at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel were wealthy Arabs from the Middle East and Shafiq bin Laden, Osama's estranged half-brother, who was

looking after the investments of his family. Bush Senior was there earlier, but left before the attacks happened. Meanwhile, President Bush was attending a second-grade reading class at Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Florida, where he read *My Pet Goat* while America was under siege.

The Saudi connection explains in part why Bush and his inner circle shunned the idea of Saudi involvement in 9/11 despite the fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi. Moreover, cognizant too in all likelihood of the other fact, and perhaps because of this fact, that roughly \$860 billion had been invested in the United States over the past 25 years by ‘high-net-worth’ Saudis, they were behooved to find another pet goat – Iraq.

Richard A. Clarke, former top terrorism advisor of Bush reveals in an interview with CBS that the day after the incident, the president gave a “clear indication that he wanted us to come back with the word that there was an Iraqi hand behind 9/11 . . . Because they had been planning to do something about Iraq from the time they came into office.”

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld also wanted to bomb Iraq. Again, according to Clarke:

Donald Rumsfeld said, when we talked about bombing the Al Qaeda structure in Afghanistan, he said there were no good targets in Afghanistan. He said, ‘Let’s bomb Iraq.’ And we said Iraq has nothing to do with this. And that didn’t seem to make much difference. And the reason they had to do Afghanistan first was that it was obvious – because Al Qaeda had attacked us, and it was obvious that Al Qaeda was in Afghanistan.

The Saudi connection explains in part why Bush and his inner circle deemed it proper to evacuate members of the bin Laden family out of the country in the wake of 9/11. Interviewed on Larry King Live, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the United States, puts it in this manner: “We’ve had about 24 members of bin Laden’s family in America... And his majesty said it’s not fair to those innocent people to be subjected to any harm. On the other hand, we understood the high emotions, so we coordinated with the FBI . . . We got them all out.”

Between September 14 and 24, when airspace reopened, six chartered flights with 142 people, mostly Saudi Arabian, departed from the United States. One particular flight that departed September 20 carried 26 passengers, most of whom were relatives of Osama bin Laden.



Michael Moore talks with Congressman John Tanner on Capitol Hill. (Retrieved from <http://www.michaelmoore.com/special/f911-screenshots.php> on February 4, 2005.)

More than 1,200 other innocent foreigners of Arab or South Asian origin took their place as part of the government's investigation into terror attacks. Hundreds of these American immigrants were rounded up and detained, often under harsh and abusive conditions, some languishing for months in jail without the benefit of a telephone call or contact with a lawyer.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is the story of a nation terrorized by its own president, kept in constant fear by FBI agents, and coerced into accepting a piece of legislation, the USA Patriot Act, that infringes on basic human rights.

The Act, for one, according to Congressman John Conyers (D-Michigan) of the House Judiciary Committee, assumed, on the part of the Administration, that "there had to be a surrender of certain of our rights".

Moreover, according to Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisconsin), also of the House Judiciary Committee, "There are several definitions in the Bill that are quite troubling. First of all, the definition of terrorist . . . "This definition is so expansive that it could, in fact, include people the likes of film maker Moore."

Psychiatrist and Member of Congress Jim McDermott (D-Washington) analyzes the situation in the following manner:

Fear does work. Yes. You can make people do anything if they're afraid ... You make them afraid by creating an aura of endless threat... They played us like an organ. They raised the orange up to red and then they

dropped it back to orange. They gave these mixed messages which were crazy maybe...It's like training a dog. You tell him to sit down, you tell him to roll over...Well, the American people are being treated like that. It was very, very skillfully...and ugly what they did...They will continue as long as this Administration is in charge of every once in a while scaring everybody deeply...It's not going to go down to green or blue. (But) there is no way that anybody can live constantly on the edge like that.

Congressman McDermott refers to a color-coded Terrorist Attack Warning Scale – where green stands for low risk of terrorists attacks; blue, for general risk of terrorist attacks; yellow, for elevated risk of terrorists attacks; orange, for high risk of terrorist attacks; and red, for severe risk of terrorist attacks. I believe it is from this Scale that Moore found inspiration for the title of his film.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is also the story of young men and women from disadvantaged communities in the United States, who have joined the Army in the hope of getting a better deal in life, but are instead, according to Moore, committed to a war waged by a President *based on a lie*.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is a story that has yet to find its end.

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