Bush documentary: an "intimate" portrait of an empty vessel

Journeys with George, directed by Aaron Lubarsky and Alexandra Pelosi

David Walsh
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In 2000 Alexandra Pelosi, the daughter of Democratic Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi of California, was a member of the press corps covering George W. Bush's campaign for president. Pelosi, then a field producer for NBC News, took her video camera along. *Journeys with George* is the resulting documentary film.

Pelosi's work, shown last month on HBO, is shallow and unserious. An irritating and mock-diaristic tone is established in the opening moments, as the co-director (along with Aaron Lubarsky)—in a voice-over—calls her work a "home movie of my yearlong road trip with this man in his race to become leader of the free world."

The 2000 presidential election campaign, which culminated in the crisis over the Florida vote and the anti-democratic ruling by the Supreme Court to install Bush in the White House, was an event of major significance, even if many of the participants, including the Republican candidate, were only dimly aware of its implications. To grasp this significance one would have to possess some knowledge of history, including recent US history, and sensitivity to the great tensions building up within the American political system.

A serious work could have been made from the experience Pelosi underwent, but only if a filmmaker were capable of standing back from the day-to-day flow of events and asserting an independent and critical viewpoint. Pelosi has obviously been immunized against carrying out any such activity. She goes entirely "with the flow," wallowing in and celebrating the trivia of the campaign trail.

Nothing is too banal to escape her attention, particularly her personal relations with Bush and her fellow press corps members. Such a method, whatever Pelosi may think, assists the director in painting a politically sanitized picture of the then-Texas governor.

The public would be lulled to sleep if it drew its impression of George W. Bush solely from *Journeys with George*. In this regard, the film speaks volumes about the state of American liberalism, a political force so enervated that it is incapable of offering a serious critique of the extreme right, much less putting up a struggle against it.

The film's scenes fall into three general categories. Those treated most fleetingly, to some extent deservedly so, involve the would-be Republican nominee's appearances before live audiences. These are wholly stage-managed events, with vetted audiences and banal speeches. As Pelosi makes clear, Bush repeatedly gives the same speech, proclaiming his allegiance to "faith and family" and promising to restore "higher standards" to the White House.

Everything about the Bush campaign is reactionary and dishonest. Even the "hand-painted" signs carried at rallies, one learns, are mass-produced by Republican functionaries. "No real people," as one journalist notes, are anywhere near the events.

The film follows Bush as he attempts to win Republican contests in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Michigan, California and beyond. Television news footage takes us to the general election, the conflict over the Florida result and, ultimately, Bush's swearing in on January 20, 2001.

The second concern of Pelosi is the press corps itself, with whom she travels for more than a year. She is too much of this crowd to notice what a damning picture her film provides of the "free press." Although there are a few cynical and observant comments of a fairly obvious character, particularly from Wayne Slater of the *Dallas Morning News* and R.G. Ratcliffe of the *Houston Chronicle*, in general the media representatives are docile and deferential to the Bush camp. In an astonishing admission, one reporter tells Pelosi that "everyone [in the press corps] goes weak in the knees when he [Bush] comes back here."

No member of the media chooses to ask a difficult question for fear of being ostracized. Pelosi learns this first-hand when she asks Bush at a press conference about the record number of executions in Texas. He later tells her that she hit him "below the belt," and he snubs her for a time. Having learned her lesson, Pelosi never asks a tough question again.

The essential fraud of the Bush campaign, the extreme right-wing agenda concealed behind the slogan of "compassionate conservatism," is never exposed. Pelosi makes next to nothing, for example, of Bush's appearance—captured by her video camera—at the ultra-right center of religious bigotry, Bob Jones University in South Carolina. There is unquestioning acceptance throughout the film that Bush, an ignoramus bankrolled by corporate interests to the tune of tens of millions of dollars, is a legitimate and substantial political figure. This was the general line of the liberal media during the election of 2000.

One journalist, trooping from "photo op to photo op," comments that he and his colleagues are all "lemmings ... we follow and do what they [the Bush officials] say." Despite the occasional grumbling, the media can be seen functioning in this campaign primarily to conceal the truth about the threat represented by Bush from the public.

This is not an oversight. The journalists, who travel in what is appropriately termed "the bubble," constitute a particularly cynical upper-middle-class layer, insulated from the problems of ordinary people. In one of the few half-honest comments in *Journeys with George*, Richard Wolffe of the *Financial Times* tells Pelosi, "We're a lot of really well-paid people trying to convince a lot of other really well-paid people that we know what's going on in ordinary people's minds."

The third category of scenes involves what is obviously of paramount importance to Pelosi—her efforts to establish a friendly relationship with

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Bush. This is the most repellent aspect of the film. The film's title, Bush's own suggestion, is a tribute to the cozy relations between the director and her subject.

Pelosi's idea of penetrating filmmaking is to catch Bush or his aides (Karen Hughes, Karl Rove) at supposedly unguarded moments and reveal their "human" side to the spectator. The superficiality of this method points to an underlying weakness of so-called *cinema verité*, particularly in this debased and intellectually lazy incarnation: the notion that a filmed image, or even a series of images, reveals by itself the truth about a given phenomenon. An image presented outside the necessary social and historical context can be as false as a doctored photograph.

Nothing is given to the spectator of *Journeys with George* about Bush's history or political program, except the brief reference to his having presided over more than 150 executions as governor of Texas. No reference is made to the extreme right-wing forces pushing him forward, the same forces responsible for the sex scandal and impeachment drive that nearly toppled an elected president less than two years previously.

No connection is made between George W. Bush and his father's administration, responsible for the first war against Iraq and the resulting mass suffering and death. Nothing is made of Bush's wealth and his ties to the most corrupt elements of the corporate elite.

Bush comes across in Pelosi's film as a political nonentity, a Cheeze Doodle and bologna-eating lightweight, far more interested in bantering with the media members and making silly faces at Pelosi's camera than discussing a political matter, or any substantive matter of any kind. When Pelosi asks the candidate, "Are you going to look out for the little guy?," Bush cannot even find it in himself to give a stock, fake-earnest reply. He answers, "I am the little guy. Have you noticed that I'm five-eleven and my brother is six-three?"

The eternal frat boy, with a pronounced streak of cruelty and vindictiveness, Bush glad-hands his way around the media plane. He shows an inordinate amount of interest in Pelosi's love life, making vaguely suggestive remarks throughout.

In one of the most revealing sequences, Bush intervenes in a dispute on the press plane between media members drinking and playing loud music and those who want a little peace and quiet, including Pelosi. He sides with the former, telling her, "Look, these guys were just up there trying to have a good solid margarita, they wanted to play some music, they wanted to get hopping here at 45,000 [feet]. And you stepped in ... and you rained on the parade."

Pelosi asks, "What's it like being ... with all these animals back here?" Bush replies, "These are my people. It takes an animal to know an animal. And, uh, I'm not admitting I'm an animal with 60 days to go in the campaign, I am admitting I like the animals.... You're back here with my people. You're back here with the tequila drinkers, yeah. What you need is to go up there and make a little whoopee with the tequila drinkers, get to know them better."

Scenes like this presumably induced an HBO cable television network publicist to write, "This is the Bush that Pelosi captures frequently over the course of the documentary: unguarded, light-hearted, flirtatious, a jokester." Each to his own taste.

The Republican candidate-to-be seems relatively little interested in politics. He remains remarkably unaffected by his defeats in early primaries in New Hampshire and Michigan. Only after Bush's South Carolina victory does he begin, clearly on the advice of his handlers, to adopt a more decorous manner. At one point, he tells Pelosi, "I started out a cowboy. Now I'm a statesman."

Journeys with George lends credence to the argument that Bush is essentially an empty vessel, the idle son and scapegrace of a powerful family, a front-man for more conscious and politically motivated forces. He seems fully capable, out of stupidity and indifference, of signing anything pushed across his desk. A war with Iraq, or North Korea, or Iran, with its inevitably bloody consequences, would not trouble his sleep any more than the state execution of poor blacks and whites in Texas. Hannah Arendt's famous comment about the "banality of evil" seems to apply here.

Pelosi's film, in the end, is a political whitewash. No wonder that Bush, according to the director, congratulated her on the film when they met at a White House barbecue last summer. She told the *San Jose Mercury News*, "And I said, 'Have you seen it?' And he said, 'Everyone at the White House who's seen it just loves it.'"

The degeneration in the personnel of a given ruling class (and its chroniclers) is a function, in the final analysis, of the decline in its historic fortunes and prospects. Those who bemoan the presence of someone as ignorant and crude as George W. Bush in the White House underestimate the crisis of American capitalism and its objectively determined inability to act in a farsighted and politically responsible fashion. Bush is an adequate representative of the dominant section of the American elite: reckless, arrogant, shortsighted and criminal to the core.

The distance that the US political class has traveled in the past four decades can be gauged by comparing *Journeys with George* with another documentary treating a presidential election campaign: *Primary*. In 1960 Robert Drew, a former *Life* magazine correspondent and editor, assembled a remarkable group, including Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and Albert Maysles (all future prominent figures in documentary filmmaking), for the purpose of filming the Wisconsin Democratic Party primary in March and April of that year between Senators John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey.

The film, which provides a relatively cold-eyed and even cynical glimpse at the inner workings of a political campaign, pioneered the *cinema verité* style in the US: it had less than three minutes of narration, no interviews with the candidates and no intrusive presence of the filmmakers.

It would not be idealizing either Kennedy or Humphrey, Cold War anticommunist politicians both (Kennedy, a millionaire, traveled around the state in a new 40-passenger jet), to note that the level of political discourse in *Primary* is considerably higher than that in *Journeys with George*. The very fact there is a political discourse and an appeal to distinct social layers and constituencies around policy issues, and not merely trivial banter, is already a marked difference.

Kennedy later would comment: "I spoke in Wisconsin, for example, on farm legislation, foreign policy, defense, civil rights, and several dozen other issues.... At almost every stop in Wisconsin I invited questions—and the questions came—on price supports, labor unions, disengagement, taxes and inflation."

Humphrey, for his part, makes a populist appeal to Wisconsin farmers. He tells one group of farmers that the eastern establishment media, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and *Boston Globe*, "laugh at you." Both political figures, within definite limits, evoke considerable interest and even enthusiasm.

Pelosi's film, on the other hand, reveals an intellectually and politically exhausted ruling circle. Isolated from the mass of the American people and with no solutions to the enormous social problems blighting the society, the political establishment has turned to a George W. Bush. In the establishment's selection of that figure one can gain some idea of its historical blind alley.

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