

Corporate censorship in the US

# Disney blocks release of Michael Moore documentary

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In another blatant example of corporate political censorship, the multibillion-dollar Walt Disney entertainment company has told its subsidiary, Miramax Film Corp., not to distribute *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the latest film by Oscar-winning filmmaker Michael Moore, in North America. Disney's actions are part of an intensifying campaign by US ruling circles to censor or silence all opposition to the Bush administration's "global war on terror."

The documentary, whose title is a spinoff from Ray Bradbury's dark novel about censorship under a future fascist state, examines the White House response to the September 11 terrorist hijackings and the close personal and financial links between the Bush administration and Saudi Arabia's bin Laden family. The film, which also includes interviews with American soldiers opposing the US occupation of Iraq, follows Moore's popular documentary *Bowling for Columbine*.

Moore's satirical exposures of the Bush administration have been highly popular. *Bowling for Columbine* has been widely acclaimed and is the most profitable documentary in film history—produced for \$3 million, it has so far made over \$120 million. Moore's book, *Stupid White Men*, has sold well over a million copies and remained on international best-seller lists for months.

Moore said the primary thrust of his new film was to explore "what has happened" to the US since September 11 and "how the Bush administration used this tragic event to push its agenda."

Responding to Disney's action, he said: "At some point the question has to be asked: 'Should this be happening in a free and open society where the monied interests essentially call the shots regarding the

information that the public is allowed to see?'" *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a "partisan" movie, he said, adding, "[I]t is partisan on the side of the poor and working people in this country who provide fodder for this war machine."

Moore has come under increasing attacks by extreme right-wing elements and sections of the corporate media following his Oscar-acceptance speech last year during which he denounced the impending invasion of Iraq and described George W. Bush as a "fictional" president who came to power through a "fictional" election result.

The documentary filmmaker had to overcome various funding problems to complete *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Mel Gibson's Icon Productions initially agreed to finance the production, but suddenly withdrew last year, according to press reports, after Gibson was contacted by the White House and "warned off."

Smelling windfall profits, Miramax stepped in and agreed to provide "bridging funds" in exchange for a lucrative distribution deal. But when Disney bought out the company more than 10 years ago, part of the deal gave the giant entertainment corporation the "right" to block any Miramax release it disagreed with.

According to the *New York Times*, Disney told Miramax that Moore's documentary was too contentious and would be bad for business, endangering in particular the tax breaks it receives for its theme park, hotels and other ventures in Florida, where Jeb Bush is governor. "It is not in the interest of any major corporation to be dragged into a highly charged political battle," a senior Disney executive told the newspaper. Miramax has said that Disney is "misapplying" its power over the subsidiary and wants

to negotiate a deal.

The *Times* reported that Disney executives said the tax breaks had nothing to do with its decision but that the company “catered to families of all political persuasions and the Moore documentary could alienate viewers.” These denials are disingenuous, to say the least. The family Disney is really concerned about the Bush clan and their political supporters.

Moore has vowed that his film will be released in American cinemas before the presidential election this year.

“The whole story behind this (and other attempts) to kill our movie will be told in more detail as the days and weeks go on,” Moore wrote on his website today. “For nearly a year, this struggle has been a lesson in just how difficult it is in this country to create a piece of art that might upset those in charge.... All I can say is, thank God for Harvey Weinstein and Miramax who have stood by me during the entire production of this movie.”

This faith is shortsighted and foolish. Miramax and Weinstein, like Disney, have no interest in exposing the Bush administration or publicizing how the White House used the September 11 terrorist attacks to take forward its long-held plans to seize Iraqi oil and occupy the country.

The days when Miramax could be regarded as a supporter of “independent” productions, willing to fight for their release, are long gone. The company’s central concerns are its profits; it has gladly shelved or held back the release of any film that might offend the powers that be.

Miramax refused to release *The Quiet American*, by Australian director Philip Noyce, for almost 18 months after September 11, 2001, claiming it could be regarded as “anti-American” and “unpatriotic.” Likewise with Gregor Jordan’s *Buffalo Soldiers*. Jordan’s satire about US army life in Germany in the late 1980s was shelved for almost two years, with Miramax claiming that it was “too difficult” to release under conditions of the US “war against terrorism.”

Disney’s effort to disassociate itself from *Fahrenheit 9/11* follows an escalating pattern of attacks on democratic rights and indicates that America’s ruling elite cannot tolerate any criticism of its so-called “war against terror.”

The media and entertainment giant’s decision to act

as political police for the Bush administration follows high-level discussions in November 2001 between major US film studios and television networks and Karl Rove, George Bush’s key political advisor. The talks were organized to discuss how American media and entertainment corporations could advance White House war policies.

Corporate media outlets have slavishly regurgitated White House press releases and ignored or covered up American military atrocities, while whipping up support for the invasion of Iraq. Similarly, Hollywood does what it can to discourage any genuine voices of artistic dissent and responds immediately to political concerns by the White House and other right-wing forces.

Last November, CBS executives cancelled a two-part television drama, “The Reagans,” after a campaign by right-wing forces claiming it was uncomplimentary to the former US president and his wife.

Recent publicity about the “Sixty Minutes II” exposure of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq carefully ignores the fact that CBS producers were collaborating with the US military over the issue and only put the program on the air after it had been given the go-ahead by the Pentagon.

The revelation about Disney’s action comes less than a week after the right-wing Sinclair Broadcast Group refused to allow its television network to screen a special episode of the high-rating “Nightline” program reading names of American soldiers killed in Iraq on its network. Sinclair claimed that the “Nightline” episode was part of a conspiracy to undermine the US occupation.

Disney’s attempt to prevent the release of *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a clear political attack on freedom of expression. Filmmakers, artists and all those determined to defend basic democratic rights must oppose this censorship and demand the immediate release of Moore’s film.



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