

Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 comes under right-wing attack

David Walsh
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US filmmaker Michael Moore's new documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, scheduled to open in more than 500 theaters on June 25, has come under fierce attack from right-wing Republican elements. The campaign against the film, which harshly criticizes the Bush administration's response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, is an indication of the sensitivity of the cabal in the White House to any light being shed on its activities.

A Republican front group, Move America Forward, has set up a web site and urged its supporters to pressure movie theaters not to show the film. The site declares: " 'Bash America' filmmaker Michael Moore is about to unleash an attack on the U.S. Military, the heroic men and women of the Armed Forces and our Commander-In-Chief via his film *Fahrenheit 9/11*.... The goal of the film is abundantly clear: to undermine the war on terrorism."

The group's web site also states: "Since we are the customers of the American movie theatres, it is important for us to speak up loudly and tell the industry executives that we don't want this misleading and grotesque movie being shown at our local cinema."

The chairman of Move America Forward is Howard Kaloogian, a former California assemblyman who helped organize last year's recall election in California and made a failed bid for the Republican US Senate nomination. The public relations firm for the organization is Russo Marsh & Rogers. One of its partners, Ron Rogers, teamed up with longtime Republican strategists Lyn Nofziger and Ed Rollins to work on the unsuccessful 2002 California gubernatorial campaign of Bill Simon.

Whether Move America Forward's effort to suppress *Fahrenheit 9/11* will bear any fruit remains to be seen. On his web site, Michael Moore notes that "three

national/regional theater chains...have not booked the movie in their theaters. One theater owner in Illinois has reported receiving death threats."

Moore's difficulties in getting his film made and into cinemas are by now well known. According to Roger Friedman of Fox News Channel, Mel Gibson's company Icon Productions was all set to finance Moore's film, but when the \$5 million deal was announced, "Gibson got calls from Republican friends urging him to back out of it right away."

Miramax, a company owned by Disney, stepped in and financed the documentary. Michael Eisner of Disney, in turn, refused to allow Miramax to distribute the film, claiming that the film's political content was at odds with the company's "nonpartisan" stature. Lions Gate and IFC Films then picked up the distribution.

On another front, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has saddled *Fahrenheit 9/11* with an R rating, meaning that those younger than 17 cannot see the film unless accompanied by an adult. The MPAA gave the film an R rating for "violent and disturbing images and for language."

The film's images reportedly include a public beheading in Saudi Arabia, Iraqis burned with napalm and a scene of an Iraqi man dumping a dead baby into a truck along with other corpses. There are also scenes of US abuse of Iraqi detainees.

The president of Lions Gate, Tom Ortenberg, told the press: "I think the message of the movie is so important that it should be available to be seen by as wide an audience as possible. Frankly, I don't consider any of the images in the film any more disturbing than what we have all seen on the cable news networks and the gratuitous violence that fills the screen of so many PG-13-rated action pictures."

A PG (Parental Guidance)-13 rating is supposed to alert parents to the fact that there might be material in a given film that is inappropriate for children under 13. An R rating is considerably more restrictive. Ortenberg said the latter rating might mean cutting the film's audience by 20 percent.

Moore writes on his web site: "I want all teenagers to see this film. There is nothing in the film in terms of violence that we didn't see on TV every night at the dinner hour during the Vietnam War. Of course, that's the point, isn't it? The media have given the real footage from Iraq a 'cleansing'—made it look nice, easy to digest.... I trust all of you teenagers out there will find your way into a theater to see this movie. If the government believes it is OK to send slightly older teenagers to their deaths in Iraq, I think at the very least you should be allowed to see what they are going to draft you for in a couple of years."

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Lions Gate and IFC Films are appealing the MPAA's rating. They have hired former New York Democratic governor Mario Cuomo, in private practice since 1994, to represent the film before the MPAA. A hearing is scheduled for June 22. After viewing the film three times, Cuomo told the press, "I was convinced that it should be viewed and reflected upon by as many Americans as possible...especially young people who, in a few years, might be part of our military forces."

Moore also notes that "some very sophisticated individuals have been hacking into and shutting down our website. It is an hourly fight to keep it up. We are going to find out who is doing this and we are going to pursue a criminal prosecution."

The filmmaker also promises to take to court anyone who maligns the film or damages his reputation. Moore has hired fact-checkers and claims that every word and image in the film is accurate. He has engaged a former Clinton adviser, Chris Lehane, to organize a "war room" to offer an instant response to any attacks from the right wing.

The film was well received at star-studded premieres in New York City and Los Angeles on June 14 and 15. The crowd in New York, which included Tim Robbins, Mike Myers, Tony Bennett, Glenn Close, Al Sharpton, authors Frank McCourt and Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Gere, Lauren Bacall, former UN ambassador Richard

Holbrooke, anchorman Tom Brokaw, director Barry Levinson and many others, gave Moore's work a standing ovation.

Audiences at two screenings in Los Angeles, packed with film industry luminaries, were equally receptive. Actress Drew Barrymore told the media: "I never come to premieres, but I'm so here on this one. I'm looking forward to this more than anything in the world." Actress Leelee Sobieski told reporters after one of the screenings that she was moved to tears while watching the documentary and said that *Fahrenheit 9/11* "should be required for everyone in America to see as part of their education in high schools." Actor Leonardo DiCaprio was so enthusiastic that he reportedly attended screenings on both coasts.

The hysterical reaction of the ultra-right and the massive popular anticipation of the film—entirely unprecedented for a documentary work—underscore the extraordinary volatility of the political situation in the US. More than that, in a year dominated by an election campaign in which the two major figures, George W. Bush and John Kerry, are both pro-war candidates, with virtually indistinguishable platforms, *Fahrenheit 9/11* has become the focal point for something practically unheard of in the US—open political debate.



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