

Liberal philistinism and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*

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9 July 2004

Through July 7 nearly ten million people in the US had viewed Michael Moore's documentary film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*. That is to say, millions understand better now than they did prior to June 25 that the American government is run by a gang of crooks with ambitions to plunder and dominate the globe.

Moore's film has its weaknesses, but it argues persuasively that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Wolfowitz and the rest are liars and war criminals, with intimate connections to big business in general and the oil industry in particular. About these facts there simply is no longer any debate within an increasingly wide layer of the population.

The success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* is deeply disturbing to the leading figures in the US media, all of whom, in one way or another, helped conceal certain truths about the Hussein regime in Iraq—that it possessed no weapons of mass destruction, that it had no connection to Al Qaeda, that it bore no responsibility whatsoever for the September 11 attacks—from the American people.

It is only natural then that columnists whose lies or apologies for imperialist intervention have been laid bare should turn venomously on *Fahrenheit 9/11* as part of a more general damage-control operation.

Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*—along with others like Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*—has recently weighed in with a strident attack on Moore's documentary.

Cohen has a particularly despicable record on the Iraq war. After expressing reservations about the US intervening again in the Persian Gulf, the *Post* columnist—like Paul on the road to Damascus—saw the light on February 5, 2003, in the rather unedifying form of Secretary of State Colin Powell's appearance at the United Nations Security Council.

The purpose of Powell's speech, which alleged that the Iraqis had made no effort to disarm and, in fact, were "concealing their efforts to produce more weapons of mass destruction," was to influence public opinion in the US, which was deeply divided over the war drive. Indeed only ten days later hundreds of thousands in the US and millions more around the world protested against the threat of war. To counter the growing skepticism in the American population the government thought it necessary to obtain Security Council sanction for the invasion of a sovereign nation.

The February 5 appearance was also intended to make it possible for the Russian and French governments, as well as Democratic Party leaders and various media pundits in the US, to drop their previous half-hearted objections in the face of such "compelling" and "convincing" evidence as Powell presented.

With Cohen, at least, the tactic worked like a charm.

Powell's speech contained a collection of charges about Iraqi chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and links to terrorism, none of which was verified at the time and all of which have subsequently been disproved. The secret arsenals of chemical and biological weapons about which the Secretary of State claimed to have definitive knowledge have never been uncovered, for the simple reason that they didn't exist.

Cohen, however, was convinced. In "A Winning Hand for Powell" on February 6 he wrote: "The evidence he [Powell] presented to the United Nations—some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail—had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them. Only a fool—or possibly a Frenchman—could conclude otherwise."

Proceeding along these filthy lines, Cohen argued that the "clincher" for him was not any particular piece of evidence, none of which he bothered to outline or defend, but "the totality of the material and the fact that Powell himself had presented it. ... Here was a reasonable man making a reasonable case."

The *Post* columnist hammered home the point that Powell's presentation "regarding chemical and biological weapons was so strong—so convincing—it hardly mattered that nukes may be years away, and thank God for that."

After more insults directed at French government officials who "are so far deaf to such logic," Cohen concluded, "If anyone had any doubt, Powell proved that it [Iraq] has defied international law—not to mention international norms concerning human rights—and virtually dared the United Nations to put up or shut up. There is no other hand. There is no choice."

As the WSWWS noted at the time, to meet his deadline Cohen was probably "typing away before Powell even finished speaking." He could not possibly have digested or examined the material presented to the Security Council. Such was the desperation of Cohen and others, like fellow *Post* columnist Mary McGrory, to rid themselves of their inconvenient qualms and hop on the war bandwagon!

The truth about Powell's charges was available in February 2003. It was not hidden in some underground vault, accessible only to a select few. The WSWWS, basing itself on reports issued by Chief UN Weapons Inspector Hans Blix, former inspectors like Scott Ritter, various US and British intelligence agencies, the BBC and other media outlets, debunked the Secretary of State's claims the same day the *Post* carried Cohen's column.

In any quasi-healthy political and intellectual environment Cohen would have become a pariah for his February 6 article. Cohen, however, is shameless. And, after all, who in the American mass media—many of whom are also accomplices in the aggression against Iraq—will call him to account?

In "Baloney, Moore or Less," Cohen's recent attack on *Fahrenheit 9/11*, he explains that he began to take notes in the cinema, but "gave up, defeated by the utter stupidity of the movie."

As an example of Moore's supposedly reprehensible method, Cohen takes the case of John Ellis, the first cousin of George W. and (Florida governor) Jeb Bush, who led the Fox News decision desk on election night in November 2000. *Fahrenheit 9/11* takes note of the fact that it was Ellis and Fox who first called the Florida vote for Bush—in the face of previous projections that Vice President Al Gore had carried the state—and

turned the tide for Bush.

Cohen mocks the reference: “Ellis is a Bush cousin, Moore tells us. A close cousin? We are not told. A cousin from the side of the family that did not get invited to Aunt Rivka’s wedding? Could be. A cousin who has not forgiven his relative for a slight at a family gathering—the cheap gift, the tardy entrance, the seat next to a deaf uncle? No info.”

Confronted with such a comment in the American media, one never quite knows: is this conscious deception or gross ignorance? Or a combination of the two?

The Ellis case was well documented at the time. Far from being a distant cousin, Ellis was close to the Bush brothers, and, according to a piece in the *New Yorker* magazine, in constant communication with them election night. After several of the television networks initially placed Florida in Gore’s victory column, the Bush campaign went into overdrive, pressuring the networks to reverse their decision. The suspicious Fox call for Bush in Florida, with the other networks eventually chiming in, was one element in that campaign. It had the desired effect.

Although the Bush “victory” was rescinded in the middle of the night and the Florida vote ultimately termed “too close to call,” generating a crisis that would last for weeks, the population was left with the impression, thanks in considerable part to Ellis and Fox, that Bush had won Florida and the national election. As Gore’s communications director, Mark Fabiani, noted at the time, “To have a network like Fox call it and everybody follow suit was a tremendously damaging thing. It took literally 24 to 48 hours to convince people that Gore had won the popular vote.”

Throughout his column Cohen can barely contain himself. He describes Moore’s depiction of the causes of the Iraq war as “a farrago of conspiracy theories.” The filmmaker’s attempt to fit the war largely within the narrow framework of the ambitions and greed of the Bush family is misguided, but his insistence on the role of money and oil is entirely to the point.

Only the idiotic or the entirely naïve would find it “conspiratorial” to suggest that a superpower like the US—led by the Bush-Cheney crew, no less—might have geopolitical interests in mind when undertaking the conquest of the second largest oil reserves in the world. Against a history of cynical and predatory American interventions in every part of the globe, Cohen would have us believe in the most high-minded and benign motives for the US invasion of Iraq.

Moore’s film will merely reinforce the fervor of those already convinced, according to the *Post* columnist, and encourage “a dialogue in which anti-Bush forces talk to themselves and do so in a way that puts others off.” A dialogue among nine and a half million people and counting might sound promising to some, but Cohen is clearly not impressed.

In any event, Cohen blames such a process for the fact that during the run-up to the war “I spent more time and energy arguing with those who said the war was about oil (no!) or Israel (no!) or something just as silly than I did questioning the stated reasons for invading Iraq—weapons of mass destruction and Hussein’s links to Osama bin Laden. This was stupid of me, but human nature nonetheless.”

Human nature has nothing to do with it. Cohen bought into the war because his social position, history—including his role as a consistent defender of the Zionist regime—and intellectual make-up predisposed him to do so. To fall for Powell’s hodge-podge of lies, innuendo and unsubstantiated allegations, one had to be willing to meet him more than halfway.

Now the columnist, who had access to the same information as everyone else, turns on Moore because the latter used his critical faculties and rejected the sham of the Bush administration’s case for war. In a remarkable feat of logic, Cohen—having been proven dead wrong by the objective course of events on the fundamental political question of the day—continues to attack as the “loony left” those who he concedes were

right about the falsity of the Bush government claims. He’s not about to let himself be blinded by the facts.

Moore and *Fahrenheit 9/11* are despised in part by Cohen, Kristof (who along with Ellen Goodman of the *Boston Globe* equates left-wing and popular hostility to Bush and his criminal war with the hatred felt by the right wing for Clinton!) and others because the film and the mass response to it have been entirely *unscripted* events.

After all, following the hijacking of the election and the September 11 terrorist attacks, a godsend for the Bush administration, didn’t the political and media elite have things firmly in hand? Convinced that the American public was safely cowed by the declaration of the endless “war on terror” and that the Iraqi people would not dare oppose US military might, the powers that be in Washington felt confident about launching a predatory war on the flimsiest of pretexts.

Cohen and the rest played their part, assuring themselves that in the celebratory mood that would follow the plundering of Iraqi oil no one would remember or care about their apologetics for aggression.

There is an even deeper reason for the violence of the attacks on Moore’s film. To the complacent liberal journalist there is something frightening about both *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the powerful response of the population to its charges. To acknowledge that the Iraq war was a criminal enterprise, that the US government lies unrelentingly, that millions despise the Bush administration and the entire establishment with a visceral hatred, all this is devastating to the Cohens and Kristofs and Goodmans.

It cannot be true that crimes of this dimension were taking place, because that would indicate something horribly wrong about America. And the popular outpouring must be dismissed because its implication, that the US is a powder keg, is also terrifying. Each column these people write is a soporific, delivering the message, ‘everything is well and good,’ ‘everything is under control.’

The war may be terrible, but it will pass. The Bush administration may be vile, but it too will pass. Dangers exist, but they are always somewhere else, they always emerge from some external source, some “bad guy” far away.

If, on the other hand, what Moore asserts about the US ruling elite in *Fahrenheit 9/11* is true and if the reaction to his film is an accurate reflection of the volatile state of mass consciousness, then this is a very different and disturbing picture. Then things have been done that cannot be undone; the course of American history has been irrevocably altered. Such a thought cannot be allowed! What follows from it is far too shattering for the liberal philistine. He or she responds with bewilderment and venom.

Who are these people, these so-called pundits in the American media? Cohen, we discover, has been a columnist for the *Post* since 1976. He has not distinguished himself in any significant manner over the course of nearly 30 years as a writer for one of the leading newspapers in the US. His column is a potpourri of banal observations, some ever so slightly to the left of the American political establishment (which itself has lurched sharply to the right over the past three decades), some to the right.

Cohen’s pieces are not meant to and could not influence mass public opinion. His is an insulated and isolated world, his audience primarily composed of superficial cynics like himself. Nothing he writes strikes a deep chord. Nothing is intended to challenge conventional wisdom or the status quo. The most consistent trait is a deep and abiding self-satisfaction that one senses behind and beyond the immediate subject of any one of Cohen’s columns.

Cohen, Kristof and the other erstwhile liberal, semi-liberal and quarter-liberal journalists are non-entities, “hollow men,” in the grander scheme of things. They will be remembered, not as the reasonable, mature and statesmanlike figures they imagine themselves to be, but as abject capitulators to power and well-practiced accompanists to reaction.



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