

conservative propaganda reduces *Fahrenheit 9/11* to a simplistic militant manifesto. Truth becomes a matter of editing, to the detriment of any sense of complexity or objectivity. To watch a Moore film is to be told the world comprises only nasty plutocrats ready to divide the globe for maximum profit and the gentle victims of their greed.

But people, including French people, do not like to be manipulated like this. The hatred that Bush engenders on this side of the Atlantic alone is not enough to make Moore lovable. The French feel Moore doesn't teach them anything new and that his arguments are aimed at their gullibility rather than their intelligence. In other words, the French people don't like being treated as though they are American voters. It's notable that, immediately after Cannes, *Le Nouvel Observateur*—which spearheaded the fight against the Iraq war, going so far as to compare Bush to Adolf Hitler, Osama bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein—trashed *Fahrenheit 9/11*, with one piece lamenting the “sentimental

and narcissistic Palme” awarded to Moore.

On the one hand, this movie and the success it has garnered in the United States is proof that American democracy is stronger than the machinations of the Bush family or the scheming of Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. Through the freedom of the press, the American citizenry has proved able to stand up to an authoritarian administration—despite the ongoing war in Iraq and the atmosphere of fear cultivated by the White House in the name of the fight against terrorism.

But *Fahrenheit 9/11*, simplistic and manipulative, doesn't do justice to this democracy. And the French can see through it. They love clowns, but they prefer authentic talent and works that weather the ages, and they are beginning to find that the zany antics of Moore leave something of a bad taste. It would be wonderful if *Fahrenheit 9/11* succeeded in taking votes from Bush, but the fall of the White House's present tenant might well bring about Moore's as well, for he is too close to his enemy not to disappear along with him. ■

Will Michael Moore turn on the Democrats?

Crashing the Party

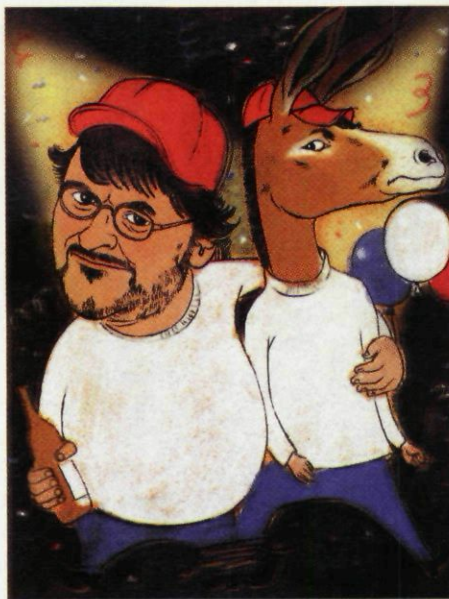
BY JASON ZENGERLE

IT'S NOT OFTEN that a U.S. political campaign is launched on foreign soil. Then again, it's not often that a U.S. political campaign revolves around a major motion picture. So, when Michael Moore went to France in late May for the world premiere of his movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* at the Cannes Film Festival, he treated the occasion like a political convention.

Speaking at a packed press conference during the festival's opening days, Moore vowed that *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which at that point did not have an American distributor, “will be shown in the United States before the election, have no fear of that.” The film, he predicted, “will be like Toto pulling the curtain back so the [American] people can see what is really going on, and they're going to be shocked, and they're going to be in awe, and they are going to respond accordingly.” As for what the appropriate response would be, there was little doubt. “The problem,” Moore explained, “is in the White House.” A few days later,

Fahrenheit 9/11 won the festival's top prize, the Palme d'Or. As Moore soaked up the adulation, he sounded less like a filmmaker receiving an award than a candidate accepting a nomination. “Thank you very much for your support,” he told a black-tie crowd that had just given him a twelve-minute standing ovation. “And goodbye, Mister Bush.”

Like any campaign kickoff, Moore and his team had laid the groundwork for his Cannes performance well in advance. At the beginning of May, Moore hired Chris Lehane, the Democratic operative who served as Al Gore's press secretary during the 2000 presidential campaign, to help with *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s publicity. Meanwhile, Miramax, the film studio that financed *Fahrenheit 9/11*, tapped the Glover Park Group—a political consulting firm that boasts a number of veterans of the Clinton White House and the Gore campaign—to devise a nationwide promotional effort. “The idea in rolling this film out,” says one person who worked on *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s publicity campaign, “was to



make it a part of the political conversation before the film was released.”

Sure enough, *Fahrenheit 9/11* became part of that conversation on May 5, when *The New York Times* reported on its front page that the Walt Disney Company, which owns Miramax, was refusing to distribute the picture. The article reported that Disney was balking at distributing the Bush-bashing film because, Moore’s side alleged, the company was afraid of jeopardizing tax breaks it receives for its theme parks and hotels in Florida, where the president’s brother, Jeb Bush, is governor. The *Times* story ignited a media firestorm, and soon, Moore was everywhere—from National Public Radio to CNN to (the Disney-owned) ABC—blasting Mickey Mouse for political censorship. “According to today’s (May 5) *New York Times*, [*Fahrenheit 9/11*] might ‘endanger’ millions of dollars of tax breaks Disney receives from the state of Florida because the film will ‘anger’ the Governor of Florida, Jeb Bush,” Moore wrote in a missive posted on his website—neglecting to mention that the allegation in the *Times* story came from his own agent, Ari Emanuel, and that Disney, in the same story, strenuously denied the charge, saying it had told Miramax and Emanuel a year earlier that it wouldn’t distribute the film because the company preferred to be nonpartisan. It was the type of trick—selectively quoting from an impartial source—normally used in political campaign ads.

The Disney controversy fueled so much interest in *Fahrenheit 9/11* that, when the film won the Palme d’Or—a prize that usually is little-noticed in the United States—it was a national news story. And the media furor didn’t let up. In the weeks between Cannes and the film’s U.S. premiere in late June, Moore’s team sought to create a story a day about the film and win each news cycle. One day, it was a story about the film finding an American distributor. Another day, it was the film’s distributors turning a routine dispute with the Motion Picture Association of America over the film’s R rating into a major news story by retaining former New York Governor Mario Cuomo to appeal the matter. On yet another day, it was Moore announcing that his website was being hacked, presumably by sinister conservative forces, and that he was going to press charges against the culprits. “This has been as publicity driven a motion picture as we’ve ever done,” says Tom Ortenberg, the head of Lions Gate Entertainment, which is part of the consortium distributing *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

By the time *Fahrenheit 9/11* opened to sold-out theaters across the country on June 25, it was clear Moore had gotten his wish: He was now a central player in the presidential campaign. “If you had interviewed Karl Rove six weeks ago and you said to him, ‘What do you think of the Moore thing?’ he’d probably reply, ‘It’s at the margins, nobody cares,’” says the person who worked on *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s publicity campaign. “I don’t think Rove would agree that nobody cares right now.”

Indeed, Moore has become a repository for the hopes and dreams of liberals who are livid at President Bush but

uninspired by mainstream Democrats like John Kerry. Until early this year, these liberals had Howard Dean to get behind. But, when his campaign imploded, they were left in the lurch, their political sentiments finding an outlet only in their bulk purchases of Bush-bashing books like Richard Clarke’s *Against All Enemies* or Ron Suskind’s *The Price of Loyalty*. Now, Moore has come to their rescue by mounting what is essentially a parallel presidential campaign.

Moore’s campaign shares the Kerry campaign’s goal of evicting Bush from the White House. But, unlike the Kerry campaign, Moore’s effort is radical and angry enough to appeal to liberals who, like Moore, believe the Democratic Party has been too soft in its opposition to the Bush administration and the war in Iraq. “There’s a tremendous appetite among Democrats to have someone say the things that have been bothering them for the last couple years,” says Lehane. “[Moore] and this movie have come along at a time when people are looking for someone to get up there and say something interesting. He’s filled that void.” Or, as Moore himself recently told *Entertainment Weekly*, “[W]e can’t leave this up to the Democrats. It’s too serious now. I mean, this is a party that can’t even win when they win. They lose when they win, you can’t get more pathetic than that. We have to save them from themselves.” The question confronting Democrats is: If Moore is their savior, who will save them from Moore?

NOW THAT *FAHRENHEIT 9/11* has broken the record for the highest-grossing documentary of all time, raking in \$61 million through last weekend, Moore’s challenge is to maintain the momentum of his anti-Bush campaign. No stranger to self-promotion, he’s likely up to the task. For almost all of his projects, Moore has mounted large-scale publicity tours—for his last book, *Dude, Where’s My Country?*, he traveled to 58 cities in America and Europe—and he’s certain to hit the road between now and November. In addition to a tour that will most likely take him to major U.S. cities and college towns, the filmmaker, according to people close to him, will likely speak to a number of progressive organizations in the coming months, and he is fielding offers to address labor groups and even some Democratic-controlled state legislatures. Meanwhile, the National Education Association showed the film to its 11,000-plus members at its annual convention this week, and the NAACP will do the same at its convention in mid-July. What’s more, the Congressional Black Caucus is planning to do a series of events around *Fahrenheit 9/11* at black churches across the country. Then, in September, when *Fahrenheit 9/11* will likely still be playing in some theaters, Moore plans to release the DVD of the movie—which will occasion another round of publicity and promotional efforts. Moore has further vowed to visit swing states in the weeks before the election. Says one person close to Moore: “He isn’t going away.”

Moore’s parallel presidential campaign poses a dilemma for Democrats. The Kerry campaign—mindful of the

heat Wesley Clark took in the Democratic primaries when Moore, appearing on stage with Clark at a rally, accused President Bush of being a “deserter”—is keeping its distance. While it obviously appreciates the scrutiny Moore and his film are bringing to bear on the Bush administration, a campaign spokesperson was quick to announce that the Massachusetts senator hasn’t seen *Fahrenheit 9/11* and doesn’t plan to. “The campaign will keep an arm’s length from the film,” says a Kerry adviser. “There’s no upside to embracing a filmmaker who is likely to pop off at any moment with statements as inflammatory as they are impolitic.”

Other Democrats, however, aren’t so chary of Moore or his effort. In late June, Moore had a VIP screening of *Fahrenheit 9/11* at Washington, D.C.’s Uptown Theater. In attendance were a host of prominent Democrats—including Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, Florida Senator Bob Graham, California Senator Barbara Boxer, and numerous members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Even some of *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s favorite targets, such as Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle—who Moore mercilessly lampoons in the movie for being insufficiently opposed to Bush and the war in Iraq—dutifully showed up. (After the screening, Moore told *Time*, Daschle “gave me a hug and said he felt bad and that we were all gonna fight from now on. I thanked him for being a good sport.”)

Although the applause at the Washington, D.C., event was more muted than at the New York and Los Angeles VIP screenings, where liberal celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio and Rob Reiner gave it raucous receptions, the presence of so many Democrats—especially those Senate Democrats, who delayed a vote on a defense bill so they could attend—spoke louder than any standing ovation. And, just in case his presence was insufficient, Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe appeared on the red carpet after the screening to gush about the film. “I think anyone who sees this movie will come out en masse to make sure John Kerry is elected president this November,” he told a scrum of reporters. As for some of *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s more fantastical ideas, such as Moore’s implication that the war in Afghanistan was fought to build an oil pipeline for Unocal, McAuliffe refused to denounce them. “I will check into a lot of the issues myself about the pipeline and others,” the head of the Democratic Party said. “But he raises a lot of very legitimate questions.”

Democrats are willing to look the other way while Moore spins outlandish conspiracy theories because they view the filmmaker as a means to an end. “Even a fair number of people who are partisan Democrats say the movie is the work of loony tunes,” concedes one Democratic strategist. “But it’s bizarre how little has sunk in with the public about the Bush family’s connections to the Saudi royal family and how often they’ve bailed the Bush family out, so a little more oxygen under that can’t hurt.” Another Democratic strategist explains: “This film is important and has power in this cycle.”

MOORE AND HIS movie have already had a tremendous impact on one critical portion of the electorate: the left—the same folks who were inspired by Dean’s candidacy or who, angered by the Democratic Party’s swing toward the center during the Clinton years, cast their ballots for Ralph Nader in 2000. On a Monday night in late June, just after *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s record-setting opening weekend, the liberal group MoveOn.org hosted more than 4,000 house parties across the country, at which some 55,000 people showed up to listen to a live webcast featuring Moore. It was the biggest such event in MoveOn’s six-year history, according to MoveOn PAC Field Director Adam Ruben. “In Portland, we had nine hundred people at one event,” Ruben reported. “In Philadelphia, we had seven hundred people at one party, and sixty percent of them said they’d never been involved in politics before.”

In Newton, Massachusetts, an affluent suburb of Boston, William Saunders was hosting his first MoveOn event. The editor of *Harvard Design Magazine*, Saunders was apprehensive about who would show up at his house—which he had decorated with an American flag and a Kerry campaign sign. “I just hope none of them are psychos or Republicans with firebombs,” he said before the party. But Saunders’s fears were unfounded: The 40 or so people who gathered in his living room to munch on pita and baba ghanoush and sip beer and Pinot Grigio were white, upper-middle-class liberal professionals like himself.

When Moore got on the webcast, he looked optimistically ahead to the coming campaign. “I’m so encouraged, I really haven’t had this much hope in three and a half years,” Moore said. But Moore didn’t want his followers to get complacent. He urged them to take a weekend in October to visit a swing state and do literature drops or call senior citizens. And he asked them to identify five nonvoters and “adopt them,” making sure they voted against Bush in November. “None of us wants this just to be a movie where people just go to see the movie, eat some popcorn, and then go home,” he said.

Moore then took questions that had been submitted to MoveOn by e-mail. One person asked Moore’s advice to the Kerry campaign. “Do not spend the next four months moving toward the right in order to get those votes that you think you need to get out there, wherever that place is. ... Being a weak-kneed, wimpy Democrat is a sure way to lose.” What would Moore like to see from a President Kerry in his first 100 days? “In the first hundred days, bring the troops home and help organize and support the international force that the Iraqis approve of.”

Moore’s campaign seemed to have the desired effect, at least in Saunders’s living room. Although many of those in attendance were hardly Kerry fans—indeed, some even said they planned to vote for Nader since Kerry was certain to win Massachusetts—a number of them nevertheless made plans to travel to New Hampshire, the nearest swing state, in the coming weeks to register voters and go door to door for Kerry. Some said they would write letters to newspapers in

swing states throughout the country attacking Bush or supporting Kerry. "The 2004 election is triage," said one woman. "We need to stop the bleeding, and then we can address the systemic problems."

But that, in the end, may be the greatest danger Moore poses to Kerry and the Democratic Party. Because, while Kerry is currently benefiting from the "anybody but Bush" attitude gripping large parts of the left—as evidenced by his impressive fund-raising and the surprising absence of intra-party squabbling—that unity will likely be a thing of the past if he wins on November 2. Not everyone politically inspired by *Fahrenheit 9/11* subscribes to Moore's decidedly out-of-the-mainstream worldview, but the movie has clearly radicalized some voters. If Kerry wins in November, these Michael Moore Democrats may wrongly interpret the victory as a mandate for him and the rest of the Democratic Party to govern from the left. "I think we've been feeling this for the past few months, that there's been this shift in the country, that people are coming around," Moore said during the MoveOn webcast, as heads nodded in Saunders's living room.

And, when Kerry doesn't do the things Moore and his fellow travelers expect him to do—like pull American troops out of Iraq in the first 100 days—they are likely to turn on him. "Kerry will have more of a problem dealing with his base than any Democratic president ever," says one of the few Democratic strategists concerned about Moore's

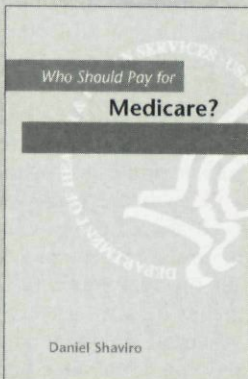
growing role in this presidential campaign. "If Kerry wins, some of the people who voted for him will have expectations he won't be able to meet. Only President Michael Moore could meet them." In fact, Moore has already signaled his intent to focus a critical eye on Kerry, recently telling *Time*, "When Clinton was President, I went after him. And if Kerry's President, on day two I'll be on him."

The difference may be that, when Clinton was president, liberal Democrats were quiescent enough to let him govern from the center; he embraced welfare reform and fiscal conservatism without suffering a reelection primary challenge. In a Kerry presidency, the Democratic Party's far more energized left—conditioned by Moore to guard against Democratic sellouts—may not be so forgiving.

But, for now, that possibility doesn't seem to bother many Democratic officials. Whatever qualms they may have about Moore, they're pushing them aside and welcoming his support. "Is the Democratic Party embracing something they're ultimately going to have to distance themselves from? I don't know, it's possible," says one Democratic strategist. "But I think this film is emblematic of the fact that all parts of the party are embracing the common goal of getting Bush out." Or, as Chris Lehane, the Democratic operative turned Moore political adviser, puts it, "I think the focus from everyone in the party right now is to follow the Al Davis game plan: Just win, baby." ■

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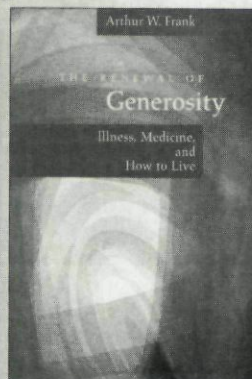


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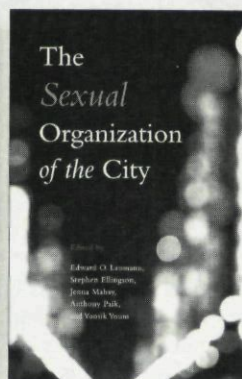


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