

Does Fahrenheit 9/11 Connect the Dots?

Written by Jeff Ignatius
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As a screed against George W. Bush to justify the feelings, suspicions, and thoughts of people who already dislike the president and plan on voting against him in November, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is strikingly effective. Outside of film festivals, I'd never heard an audience applaud a movie until I saw Michael Moore's latest documentary last week.

The film touches all the right buttons: the contested 2000 election; Bush's startling lack of grace, outward intelligence, and elocution; his family's close ties to Saudi Arabian business interests; his administration's connections with defense contractors; and a weak case for war to unseat Saddam Hussein. It's great as a rallying cry for Democrats, other liberals, and disaffected conservatives.

"We can't leave this up to the Democrats," Moore said in the July 9 issue of *Entertainment Weekly*. "It's too serious now. ... We have to save them from themselves." But as propaganda – as a compelling case to convince undecided voters and GOP loyalists that Bush needs to be voted out of office – Moore's movie is an utter failure.

In the interest of full disclosure, I'm a liberal. I can't imagine any situation in which I would cast a vote for George W. Bush. But I found *Fahrenheit 9/11* troublingly ineffective. And with the stakes this high – with, potentially, an election in the balance – it needed to be much better. Michael Moore simply isn't the man to save Democrats from themselves.

There are at least four ways that *Fahrenheit 9/11* could alter the 2004 election:

(1) It could galvanize Democrats, energizing them to recruit new voters and solidifying the base.

(2) It could galvanize Republicans, energizing them to recruit new voters and solidifying the base.

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(3) It could change the minds of people who planned to vote for George W. Bush, so that they vote for somebody else or don't vote at all.

(4) Or it could spur a person who otherwise wouldn't have voted to cast a ballot for someone other than George W. Bush.

The first two have already happened and probably cancel each other out. The last two seem unlikely given the film and its primary author.

Part of this has to do with the involvement of Michael Moore. As the political left's designated ham and agitator, Moore is such a divisive figure – because of his tone, his guerilla approach, and his sympathies – that people who disagree with him on a gut level will *never* take him seriously.

But even putting that aside, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is too unfocused and glib to be effective as a persuasive text. Although Moore presents a compelling circumstantial case against Bush, he never connects the dots enough to convict him.

For all but the die-hard anti-Bush crowd, then, the movie will raise a lot of disturbing questions it does not answer.

Basic Flaws

A big problem with *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a cogent essay is that it's not coherent.

Let's start with the title, a clever appropriation of the title of Ray Bradbury's cautionary novel *Fahrenheit 451*

. Bradbury's book was damning in its portrait of a society in which people turn in their neighbors for reading; they're apathetic about how government has infringed on their lives, yet they're vigilant in helping that same government enforce a wrongheaded ban on books. This nightmare scenario is echoed in Moore's movie when some people at a fitness club rat to the FBI on one of their fellow members for making anti-Bush comments.

But in Bradbury's book, the title made sense; 451 degrees Fahrenheit is the temperature at which plain paper spontaneously combusts. The phrase "Fahrenheit 9/11," on the other hand, joins together two unrelated concepts – temperature and the 2001 terrorist attacks that Moore thinks Bush could have prevented.

The lack of care in choosing the title is symptomatic of the movie's larger problems. Moore tries to bring together so many things that have very little to do with each other that he comes off as either lazy or apathetic. It doesn't appear that he ever stepped back from the movie, looked at its component parts, and asked himself, "What am I trying to accomplish, and does this further that goal?"

The movie starts on a false note by re-hashing the contested 2000 election and trotting out all the standard complaints about Bush stealing the election. It screams sour grapes, setting a tone

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of whiny partisanship. Anybody who thinks the election was decided through the proper if imperfect American channels – the vote-counting bureaucracy, the Electoral College, and the courts – will dismiss the movie before hearing any of its arguments.

And the entire second half of the film is disposable. Moore goes to great pains to show the world that (1) war is hell, (2) it's genuinely sad and painful when people die in wartime, (3) the military draws most of its soldiers from poverty-stricken neighborhoods; (4) members of Congress don't read the legislation they vote on; (5) dancing foreigners in ethnic costumes are funny; and (6) people run away from Michael Moore more than they flee military recruiters.

All of these are perfectly valid (if unpleasant) points. Sentient people know them all. Sometimes it helps to be reminded of them. But what do they actually have to do with George W. Bush? Which of these "accusations" about the Iraq war was not also true five decades ago, when the U.S. began its involvement in Vietnam?

Moore is trying to put war casualties – really, the very nature of war – in the lap of George W. Bush. These grave consequences don't belong there, unless Moore proves that there was absolutely no justification for the war with Iraq. The case *can* be made, but Moore drops the ball.

The *Real* Case Against W

It's telling that George W. Bush looks worst in *Fahrenheit 9/11* when he's on the screen, whether he's rattling off a non sequitur ("I call upon all nations to do everything they can to stop these terrorist killers. Thank you. Now watch this drive."), mispronouncing "nuclear" repeatedly, sitting for seven minutes in a Florida classroom after being told about the second plane flying into the World Trade Center, addressing a fundraising crowd as the "haves and have-mores," or going through his pre-speech facial-muscle routine. In these sequences, the president comes off as a buffoon.

Compared to the damage George W. Bush inflicts on himself, in other words, Michael Moore is more a pest to the president than a danger.

If you strip away the jokes, the obvious points, and a bunch of irrelevant material, *Fahrenheit 9/11* can be reduced to one salient issue: whether the Bush family's business ties have corrupted the presidency, particularly in terms of the "war on terror." It's a critical question, and it has the potential to be a deciding factor in November's presidential election. It makes up a big chunk of the first half of Moore's movie, but the film doesn't make a convincing enough case against Bush.

Stung by persistent criticism over the years that he frequently fudges his information, Moore employed fact-checkers to vet *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Like most of what Moore does, this was a clever ruse. The facts in the movie aren't really at issue. It's what the filmmaker does with them.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is a collection of secondhand information and damning insinuations that don't

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add up to much. A poster for the movie has the word “CONFIDENTIAL” printed over Moore holding up an envelope. Yet most of the film’s assertions are recycled from two sources. Moore interviews authors Craig Unger (*House of Bush, House of Saud: The Secret Relationship Between the World’s Two Most Powerful Dynasties*) and Dan Briody (*The Iron Triangle: Inside the Secret World of Carlyle Group*) but doesn’t offer actual reporting beyond that, or any relevant new information.

Furthermore, the two authors don’t even come off as experts. Unger is such an authority that when he’s asked how much money Saudis have invested in the United States, he says, “I’ve heard as high as” And from that Moore starts doing some math, guessing the economic impact of Saudi money leaving the country. And it’s all based on an estimate from an author who’s *heard some figures* – extrapolation based on a high-end guess rather than actual research.

The lack of direct investigative reporting wouldn’t be such an issue if Moore interviewed more experts, or asked the authors to clearly lay out the facts and their meaning, or offered supporting materials. But he doesn’t.

Fahrenheit 9/11 proves only that the Bush family and its political cronies are closely allied with Saudi Arabian business interests, the family of Osama bin Laden, oil companies, and defense contractors. Yes, anybody who didn’t already know it will realize that the political and business circles of the two Bush presidents are insular, indeed.

But it doesn’t necessarily follow that this close-knit world is corrupt. I expect politicians to help their friends. It only rises to the level of corruption if the Bush administration furthers personal, selfish interests in direct opposition to any reasonably legitimate American goal.

Moore says that because of Saudi investment in companies in which the president, his family, or his friends have a stake, Bush is therefore more beholden to the Saudis than the American people. The evidence? That Saudi Arabian citizens, including bin Laden family members, were flown out of the United States days after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, following only rudimentary questioning by the FBI. It’s certainly fishy, but it’s incumbent upon Moore to go beyond creating suspicion and explain how the American people were hurt by this action.

Instead of explaining rationally how the Saudi-Bush connection is bad, Moore resorts to an incendiary, hypocritical image. He shows a public beheading – from great distance – in Saudi Arabia, seemingly trying to portray that country as a land so barbaric that anybody with political or financial ties to it is automatically tainted. But capital punishment is the rule in this country, as well, and while our methods aren’t quite so grisly these days, the electric chair doesn’t give us much reason to feel superior. This is just one example of how the first half of *Fahrenheit 9/11* is mostly a game of guilt by association.

Moore also accuses companies with close ties to the Bush administration of being war profiteers, but it offers no proof. There’s an assertion that defense contractors pocket huge profits by keeping the difference between what they’re paid and what they give their

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subcontractors, but the movie offers no evidence, and even if it did, this sounds like typical business. As one person in *Fahrenheit 9/11* notes, "War is always good for certain companies."

Here, Moore fails to take his argument far enough. If he showed that the Bush administration rigged the contracts in such a way that Halliburton was *guaranteed* to make undue profits – or that the amount of the contracts far exceeded the scope of services – he might win converts. But he is content to leave reasonable doubt.

The filmmaker is also so wound up in his conspiracy theories that he never tries to debunk rational objections. *Fahrenheit 9/11* argues that the Bush administration went to war with Iraq for the benefit of oil companies and defense contractors, and certainly many people feel that way. But some intelligent people still believe that even if Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, the United States was justified in taking military action against it because of Saddam Hussein's repressive regime, his repeated refusal to comply with United Nations requirements, and his harboring of terrorists. Moore never addresses those issues, though, dismissing the war as unjustified simply because certain types of weapons were never found.

To be clear, I'm not saying that Moore's assertions aren't true. But faced with skeptical viewers, Moore has a high burden of proof. The stakes are high, and Moore's profile has grown since he won an Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine*. To borrow the tagline from *Spider-Man*: "With great power comes great responsibility."

This could actually be a companion to something Moore says in the movie's voiceover: "Immoral behavior breeds immoral behavior." There's a corollary that applies to the movie: "Half-truths breed half-truths."

How different, really, are Moore's claims about George W. Bush than the Bush administration's specious implications about a substantive link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein? Just like the Bush administration, when he's accused of fibbing, Moore can say, through a strict literal reading, "I never said *that*." No, but he strongly implied it.

It seems obvious that Michael Moore wants to unseat a president with *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but is this the best he can do? If getting George W. Bush out of the White House is so important, why has Moore made such a slipshod case for those critical undecided voters?