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American Paranoia
'Bowling for Columbine'
a review by Mike Lee
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"On behalf of our producers Kathleen Glynn and Michael Donovan (from Canada), I would like to thank the Academy for this award. I have invited the other Documentary nominees on stage with me. They are here in solidarity because we like non-fiction. We like non-fiction because we live in fictitious times. We live in a time where fictitious election results give us a fictitious president. We are now fighting a war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or the fictitious 'Orange Alerts,' we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you!

And, whenever you've got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up!"

Director Michael Moore's Oscar for best documentary at this year's Academy Awards was remarkable enough, given the circumstances -- the U.S. had just launched its invasion of Iraq -- but Moore's stinging attack on George W. Bush and his Iraq war, caused a sensation. The acceptance speech denunciation sparked off an uproar of booing, cheering and (and quite a lot of cringing embarrassment from what I could see) amongst the somberly attired but still glittering audience. An attempt, apparently organised, according to Moore, was made to drown him out -- but Moore's point was made in front of an estimated one billion TV viewers around the world, and must have infuriated Washington.

Politics is not something one normally associates with Hollywood but of course Hollywood always has been a highly political place. The movie industry lies at the epi-centre of America's popular culture and ideology.

Though Hollywood is known to be heavily populated with wealthy Republicans, in the months and weeks leading up to the war in Iraq, it was movie actors and entertainers rather than professional politicians who were the leading opponents of the war. The suggestion is, given the feeble performance of the leading Democratic Party politicians, it is Hollywood rather than Washington DC, which has become the battleground of political ideas in modern America. Into the political ferment surrounding the approaching Iraq war, Moore's 'Bowling for Columbine', a highly political documentary on firearms violence was launched and quickly became an unlikely box office hit.

As the focus of the world crisis shifted to the U.N. Security Council, and France in particular began to be demonized by U.S. politicians and the news media, 'Bowling for Columbine' was awarded a special 55th Anniversary prize at the French Cesar awards -- the French equivalent of an Oscar.

When the war began in March, with the ferocious bombing of Baghdad, the spotlight of world attention cut back for just a few hours to the Oscar ceremonies and Moore's now famous speech.

In America public interest in Moore, his movie and book soared. Here in Auckland 'Bowling for Columbine' had just completed an already long season, but after a break of a week or so it was back due to public demand, and is still running weeks later. 'Bowling for Colmbine' has now earned over US\$40 million and has become the biggest grossing documentary of all time.

Prior to 'Columbine', Moore was already a controversial figure. A rarity in modern day America, an outspoken and popular *left wing* social critic, Moore first gained notoriety in the early 90s with his movie 'Roger & Me'. 'Roger & Me' was a rather desperate exposé of General Motors and the unemployment and social misery caused by the closing down of a GM factory in Moore's hometown, Flint, Michigan. 'Roger & Me' became something of a cult movie around the art houses -- very popular amongst anti-establishment people.

A video copy was lent to me by an Alliance activist with the recommendation, "you'll really love this", or words to that effect. Actually I found it depressing, and in the end a little tedious -- perhaps it was a bit too close to home. In the grim early 90s, coming home after a hard day with the Alliance to watch 'Roger & Me' was perhaps rather too much like a busman's holiday.

Moore had further success with the "The Big One" (an attack on Nike), which was also enthusiastically recommended, but which, despite my keeping an eye out for it, I missed. Moore became perhaps more widely known and recognized for his satirical television series *The Awful Truth* -- a unique and very effective blend of social criticism and hilarious stunts, in which Moore (who not only directs but stars in his movies) lampooned corporate authority figures 'cheered on by a live audience.

Some 18 months ago, Moore published his book *Stupid White Men -- and other sorry excuses for the state of the nation* -- a no-holds-barred, attack on the Bush administration. Despite its spoof-type title, *Stupid White Men* is more sophisticated polemic than satire. One could go as far as describing it as a political manifesto for the American liberal left. The book opens with a well-written exposé of the controversial 2000 Florida election result, which gave, illegitimately, according to the evidence Moore lays out, the U.S. presidency to George W. Bush. Throughout *Stupid White Men*, Moore refers to the President only in italics, e.g. "'President' Bush" to emphasize his illegitimacy. In its plan of action the book goes so far as to draw up a hit list of right wing Democrat politicians, along with their voting records which, Moore contends, qualifies them to be dumped by voters along with the Republicans.

Though *Stupid White Men* was deliberately under promoted by its seriously embarrassed publisher HarperCollins, the book rapidly rose to number one best seller in the U.S. and has stayed at, or near the top of the list for over a year

And then came *Bowling for Columbine* . . .

In stark contrast to the steady stream of rubbish passed off as documentaries nowadays -- (a curious blend of frivolity and dread) -- *Bowling for Columbine* is a serious attempt to come to grips with one of the most important phenomena of our times -- American violence. Its phenomenal popularity may be explained not only by its timeliness but by a growing constituency of people who appear to be increasingly skeptical about what they are being told by the U.S. government and the media monopolies.

Moore chooses to set his investigation within the framework of the horrific 1999 shootings of at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Here, it will be recalled, two young, heavily-armed teenaged boys massacred 13 of their fellow students and wounded dozens of others.

The title comes from Moore's evident fascination with the disclosure that on the morning of the massacre, the two young mass-murders went bowling (that quintessential All-American recreational activity) before going off to school to slaughter their schoolmates.

'Bowling for Columbine' pointedly compares the random individual violence in American society with the massive organised violence of the American Military State. For instance, Moore shows a TV clip of President Bill Clinton in April 1999 -- on the day of the heaviest bombing of Serbia. Clinton (sounding remarkably like George W. Bush) intones that the massive bombing of the civilian infrastructure of that tiny country was "systematically destroying the regime's ability to oppress" (It will be remembered that Serbia's president was the United States' Number One Bad Guy for that particular year).

Moore reminds us that the Clinton's bombing speech took place only an hour or so before the massacre at Columbine. In response to the 'breaking news' of the shootings Clinton goes back on TV again, this time righteously lamenting "the violence" in American society in his familiar lazy drawl.

Moore hammers home the linkage between America's personal and state violence by interviewing one of the senior executives of Littleton's Lockheed Martin plant, which assembles intercontinental ballistic missiles just across town from Columbine High. The assembled missiles, we are told, are trucked away in the middle of the night so as to not disturb the children of Littleton. Here Moore asks the executive whether he sees any connection between his production of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' and the shooting at Columbine High School. The Lockheed Martin man appears genuinely stunned. It is not clear whether his confusion is caused by Moore referring to his missiles as 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' or the association of them with the Columbine killings.

In another bizarre on camera confrontation (of which he is a master), Moore brings two Columbine High shooting survivors (one in a wheel chair) to the Michigan headquarters of K-Mart (the bullets used in the shooting was apparently bought at K-Mart) and asks

straight-faced if the boys can return the bullets which are still in their bodies. After much consternation, and one imagines serious heartburn at senior management level, K-Mart takes the difficult but smart PR option and announces a phase-out for selling ammunition. For once it is Moore who seems taken by surprise that one of his stunts paid off.

Some of the most interesting episodes though, are when Moore's interviews are genuine inquires rather than rhetorical exercises. For instance, his interview with the James Nichols, the brother of Oklahoma bombing co-conspirator Terry Nichols, is particularly revealing. The fanatical Nichols' comments on access to weapons grade plutonium are unconsciously funny -- (after some reflection Nichols allowed there did need to be *some* restrictions on access to weapons grade plutonium) -- raising a titter of laughter in the audience. Similarly revealing is an interview, over a game of pool, with a 'security risk' young man who made his own barrel of napalm.

In these situations, ordinary people especially, open up to Moore -- if one could describe these violence-obsessed individuals as 'ordinary'. But I think Moore is telling us, such people are ordinary in America. And Moore appears to have some personal empathy with them. This may be because, along with his disarming sense of humour he appears to be a typical working class 'middle-American.' After all, he was born and raised in the Midwest, and as he tells us, is a life member of the National Rifle Association. With his casual, even scruffy clothes, standard baseball cap, beer-belly and shirt hanging out the back of his pants, the shambling bear-like Moore, effects an image rather less the classic anti-hero, than home-town slob.

Such a person knows his America, the real America, well. Not the glamorous America of Southern California or up town Manhattan, but the gritty 'heartland' cities and towns of his native Midwest. This is the America of the long, dark winter freezes and the social tensions of a politically narrow society set in a very wide land. An America where the wild frontier has long been tamed and fenced-off as real estate, but where the fears of white settlers remain, perhaps to fill the emptiness and boredom of modern life. This is the America of the 'Michigan Militia', heavily-armed, middle-aged, white working class males in camouflage fatigues trudging through the mud 'on patrol'. On patrol for what is not exactly clear.

Not so long ago no doubt, the Michigan Militia would have been on patrol to guard against a 'red invasion'. A very popular cult movie during the Reagan era, 'Red Dawn' portrayed the improbable scenario of a group of teenage Americans engaged in guerrilla warfare against an occupying Soviet Army. With the end of the Cold War and as the serious threat of war with a powerful foreign government receded, curiously the paranoid fears of the militant American Right turned inward -- against its *own* government -- the despised and feared 'Federal Government'.

Actually to be fair to the paranoid Right, survivalists and other denizens of America's backwoods, the fear of the U.S. government is not completely irrational. The savage violence unleashed by the Federal authorities against non-conforming citizens such as those at Waco, Texas, (let alone hapless foreigners, such as Vietnamese, Panamanians, Somalis, Serbs, Afghans or Iraqis) is a reminder that the U.S. government *is* a very violent and very dangerous organisation -- much more violent than the lunatic fringe could ever hope to be -- and, in its own way, just as paranoid.

And it is here that Moore's documentary makes its most valuable contribution to the sum of human knowledge of America. Moore begins with the working hypothesis that America is so violent because of the phenomenally high number of guns and their easy availability. The opening segment of *Bowling for Columbine* shows the bizarre scene of Moore opening a bank account and being given a complimentary shotgun by the bank management (complete with ammo).

Then, about halfway through the movie Moore discovers that on a population basis Canada has just as many guns as America does, but Canada has only a fraction of the gun violence. In one remarkable sequence Moore walks around Toronto opening doors of Canadian houses and apartments to confirm that most of the time Canadians feel safe enough to leave their doors unlocked.

Why this should be, genuinely puzzles Moore who at first considers America's violent history which he reviews in a brief cartoon segment. But Moore can't quite reconcile history as the critical factor in light of the very low civil violence in countries like Germany, which have also had violent pasts. He therefore searches for another cause and settles on a climate of artificially manufactured fear. With its constant emphasis on violent crime news stories ("if it bleeds, it leads") and 'reality' TV shows such as *Cops*, the manufacturing of fear Moore suggests, has been deliberately carried out by the media, the TV networks in particular.

Fear is also, especially since September 11, being deliberately created and exploited by the U.S. government. As Moore explains it "The real point of this film that I just got an Oscar for -- how those in charge use fear to manipulate the public into doing whatever they are told."

Ironically in light of the unexpected information he finds in Canada, Moore's conclusions, come fairly close to the "It's not guns that kill people, rather it is people that kill people" arguments of the NRA. This does not prevent Moore from pursuing the NRA president and former movie star Charlton Heston. During his time with the NRA, Heston was a hyper-active and influential spokesman for the anti gun-control lobby. His defiant and melodramatic "from my cold dead hand" became a battle cry for the pro-gun people. Moore runs a clip of Heston brandishing a musket (which had just been presented to him) in full cry declaiming the infamous phrase.

Moore was especially criticised for his interview of Heston who was then in the early stages of Alzheimers disease. The controversial interview comes at the end of the film and the story is now pretty well known. Moore looks up Heston's address with the aid of a Beverly Hills 'Homes of the Stars' map, presses the call button on the security gates and is answered by Heston himself. Moore obtains an interview probably by somewhat disingenuously mentioning of his life membership of the NRA. I confess to feeling vaguely uncomfortable as Moore set up the unsuspecting Heston for the cameras. But as I saw it, this was not Moore's main fault. Interviewing in a polemical way, Moore made the mistake of failing to let Heston answer the rapid-fire questions. Whatever you may think of Heston's pro-gun politics, he is actually a fairly shrewd observer of people and events, as his first book *The Actor's Life* reveals (see 'Nikita Goes to Hollywood' *NZ Political Review*, Autumn 2002).

Responding to Moore's question about why he thought America was so violent, Heston suggested, quite revealing, that American history "had a lot of blood on its hands." But before he could expand on this, Moore cut him off with "What about Germany?" Of course it is just not possible for Heston (or any American for that matter, including Moore) to admit that America had more blood on its hands than Germany (the leading 20th century Bad Guy country for both liberals and conservatives alike).

Groping for another answer to Moore's question, Heston offered America's "more mixed ethnicity." Rather than drawing Heston out, Moore moved quickly -- too quickly, to trap Heston as a racist. Alzheimers or not Heston was not to be caught like that (in fact Heston was active in the 1960s civil rights movement). Pretty soon after that, the interview abruptly broke up with an angry Heston walking out, trailed by Moore's cameras. A satisfactory conclusion, one suspects, for Moore the movie-maker but not really one feels, for the quality of his documentary.

Which is a pity, for if Moore had continued to play the investigator rather than the polemicist, an establishment figure like Heston explaining about "the blood on America's hands" might have been quite revealing and would have likely reinforced, *Bowling for Columbine's* overall thesis. Then again Moore may have done Heston a favour.

However Moore is quite right about the deliberate creation of fear amongst the American population ("Orange alerts" and "duct tape") but it could be argued the seeds of paranoia fall on fertile ground because of a cultural predisposition to fear. A culture which is grounded in America's unique and violent history. Heston was right about the historical "blood on America's hands" and Moore may have been blind-sided in trying to equate the orderly, obedient homogeneous society of Germany with the unruly, individualist, frontier society of strangers which created America.

American violence goes back to the first adventurers who invaded the New World from Elizabethan England -- an extremely violent time and place. The techniques of military settlements to ruthlessly suppress the natives had been first developed by the Elizabethans in Ireland.

Dee Brown in his classic *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* relates the tragic story of relentless invasion, 'ethnic cleansing' and violent extermination of the Indian tribes of America.

Karl Marx who was generally pro-American in his writings, referred in *Capital* to

"those sober virtuosi of Protestantism, the Puritans of New England in 1703, by decrees of their assembly set a premium of £40 on every Indian scalp and every captured red-skin: in 1720 a premium of £100 on every scalp; In 1744, after Massachusetts Bay had proclaimed a certain tribe as rebels the following prices: for a male scalp of 12 years and upwards £100 . . . for scalps of women and children £50."

Then there was the inherent violence of slavery and then the massive blood-letting of the American Civil War in which 11% of the then population was enlisted and which resulted in nearly one million casualties. The end of the Civil War allowed the resumption of the relentless westward invasion and the final violent subjugation of the native Americans.

Violence, as Moore points out, goes hand in hand with fear -- fear and firepower -- America always has had plenty of both.

American fear is as old as the mystery of Roanoke, one of the earliest Elizabethan settlements, the inhabitants of which vanished without trace one winter. American paranoia was evident in the Salem witchcraft trials of the 17th century. And it was apparent in the 20th century in the wild public panic caused by Orson Wells' celebrated radio broadcast of the 'War of the Worlds' in New York in the 1930s. Not for nothing did President Roosevelt try to reassure the American people by telling them that "the only thing they had to fear was fear itself."

If in previous centuries white pioneers loathed and feared 'Red skins', in the 20th century those fears were easily transferred to 'Reds'. The McCarthy anti-communist witch hunts in the early 1950s reached a level of hysteria which in the end threatened to destabilize the state -- at which time they were swiftly brought to a halt. But their corrosive legacy lived on, as David Halberstam has pointed out, profoundly influencing American political life and foreign policy until the end of the Cold War -- and perhaps beyond.

Norman Mailer, musing on the roots of American paranoia saw it this way.

"Still to say that Americans are somewhat enamoured of paranoia requires at least this much explanation. Our country was built on the expansive imaginations of people who kept dreaming about the lands to the west -- many Americans moved into the wild with no more personal wealth than the strength of their imaginations. When the frontier was finally closed, imagination inevitably turned into paranoia (which can be described, after all, as the enforced enclosure of imagination -- its artistic form is scenario) and, lo, there where the westward expansion stopped on the shores of the Pacific grew Hollywood. It would send its reels of film back to the rest of America, where imagination, now land-locked had need of scenarios. By the late Fifties and early Sixties, a good many of these scenarios had chosen anti-communism for their theme -- the American imagination saw a Red menace under every bed . . ." (Norman Mailer *Oswald's Tale -- an American Mystery*).

Hollywood has understood this latent paranoia and insecurity only too well, and has in recent years expertly exploited it in a series of increasingly cataclysmic, Armageddon type (*Independence Day*). disaster movies. Osama bin Laden or whoever was the mastermind behind the September 11 attacks clearly had the insight of an evil genius into the Hollywood-coloured psyche of American paranoia. The nightmare vision of the collapsing twin towers of the World Trade Center has surely been seared indelibly into 21st Century consciousness. And in this respect there appears to be a curious identity of political interests between the Bush administration and the Islamist terrorists of al Qaeda in keeping Americans frightened. What more clever way of juxtaposing those two great American tendencies of fear and violence than the term 'The War on Terror?'

And it is the highly sensitive area of September 11 and the hyper-taboo question of connections between the Bush and bin Laden families and the mysterious 'Carlisle Group' which is what Moore intends to explore in his forthcoming movie 'Fahrenheit 911'. According to *Reuters* the movie is to be bankrolled by the Disney owned Miramax Studio after a production company owned by Mel Gibson pulled out.

Moore would be aware, that this sort of material is political dynamite and that political dissidents in America, especially leftish, even liberal, populists, live very dangerously. There is after all a long list of such political figures from Huey P. Long to Malcolm X, the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King who ended up murdered. Even non-conforming show-biz type personalities, like *Hustler* publisher Larry Flint and the comedian Lenny Bruce had their lives more or less ruined by flouting the American Way too brazenly.

In the circumstances then, Moore's refusal to be intimidated is all the more remarkable. And the more courageous and outspoken Moore is, then the more popular he becomes and the greater the threat he must be to the current ruling élite. One fears that his growing status as the unofficial American Leader of the Opposition (forget about those Democrat presidential hopefuls) may in the end cost him personally. Let's hope I am wrong about this. *Fahrenheit 911* is due for release in the months leading up to next year's Presidential election.