

Backdraft 9/11: A Backlash Against Michael Moore on Election Day?

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Introduction

As Michael Moore makes overtures toward the Academy Awards for a “Best Picture” Oscar, increasing numbers of people are wondering: Did Michael Moore actually help George W. Bush win another four years as president? Recently NPR and *This Week* veteran Cokie Roberts gave public voice to what had been whispered on the internet since the election: “I think Michael Moore actually had a very major impact—a negative impact—on the Democratic Party,” she said. “I think he exemplified all of the things that people hate about Democrats.”¹ Undoubtedly, persuasive backlash is a spectre that makes the professional influencer’s blood run cold; but influence that backfires is actually quite common in law, sales, politics, and anywhere people attempt to change other people’s minds.

Pundits Line Up to Congratulate Moore

If it’s rude to inquire about Moore’s complicity in Bush’s win, consider the commentators who prematurely cued up in Moore’s reception line to congratulate him on defeating Bush: “Moore’s film could actually prove to be the first in history to help unseat a sitting American president,” predicted the Austin Chronicle.² “Republicans Beware!” warned the Associated Press, who saw the film increasing the public’s interest in the war.³ Dozens of other newspapers concurred that *Fahrenheit 9/11* could very possibly influence the election.⁴ Professors across the nation wistfully opined on the potential impact of Moore’s film on the electorate. And for those who thought the film just ‘preached to the choir,’ the Pew Research Center reminded us that the film “didn’t necessarily need to win over GOP voters in order to have an effect on the election.”⁵ Such was the investment in Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and big influence dividends were expected.

Moore Had High Hopes

Moore had high hopes, too. He confidently predicted that “any swing voters that see my movie will leave having swung.”⁶ Moore’s own polling told him his movie was persuasive: “We found that if you entered the theater on the fence, you fell off it somewhere during those two hours.”⁷ When asked about his standing with the Right, Moore said, “They hate me because they perceive how effective my films can be.”⁸ “I know Republicans are mad that my film may have convinced just enough people to tip the balance in this election.”⁹ Moore also prophesied that

viewers who supported Bush or the war “will feel deceived and betrayed, and they will respond with a vengeance.”

Perhaps we can forgive Moore for that last statement, given the lackluster results of his “Slacker Uprising Tour” across the nation’s universities, where he whipped students into lather for vengeance and for Kerry. He may have been referring to a rare and elusive form of “slacker vengeance”—the vengeance that runs its course after one finishes his breakfast beer and watches a bit of TV.¹⁰ His tour resulted in the youths of America delivering the same 17% of the vote in 2004 as they did in 2000,¹¹ when slackers did *not* have the benefit of Moore’s vengeance counseling.

Things That Go Backlash in the Night

A persistent hazard for all influence professionals—from propagandist to salesperson to lobbyist to attorney—is the lurking possibility of “backlash” or “boomerang” influence. Dr. Gregory Payne of Emerson University suspects that Moore damaged Kerry’s campaign in ways that Carl Rove could only hope to do.¹² David Bossie, president of Citizens United, went so far as to extend a public ‘thank-you’ to Moore for helping elect Bush.¹³ In the persuasion game, it’s always possible for the influence agent to drive his intended audience *away* from his advocacy, perhaps even into the arms of his opponent. Backlash is a risk when the persuader is too vociferous, overtly manipulative, excessively negative, or just too extreme.

But wait a second--do persuasion backlashes really occur all that often? They actually happen rather frequently, and you’ve experienced them yourself. Have you ever walked into a store or onto a car lot with the intention to buy, and you met a salesperson whose tactics were so manipulative that you refused to do business with him? That’s a backlash.

Backlash is the monster in the closet for every professional persuader. He prays it will not haunt him, but wishes it on his opponent instead. Witness, for example, Moore’s incantation in a report he filed from the Republican convention two months before the 2004 election: “Yes, the Bush Republicans huff and they puff, but they blow their own house down.”¹⁴ Some people think it was actually Moore who blew his own house down in 2000 with his support of Nader—indirectly helping Bush win his first term—and who blew it again in 2004 by outraging middle America, helping Bush to a second term.¹⁵

Do backlashes occur on a national level? Yes, but they’re hard to document and effortless to deny, because there are so many causes of large effects. It’s easy to point to some other cause and say, “There’s the real reason.” Predictably, Moore denies the possibility of a *Fahrenheit* or more broadly, a *Moore* backlash, pointing the finger of blame at Kerry himself. Moore believes he helped spare the

Democrats an even larger defeat: “We presented a Bush landslide... Democrats need to embrace Hollywood because this is where they need to come to learn how to tell a story.”¹⁶ Sadly, social scientists aren’t roaming the countryside, randomly assigning people to conditions, issuing pre- and post-tests, and calculating statistical significance for large cultural phenomena. But that doesn’t mean the boomerang phenomena isn’t observable. Consider the following unambiguous political backlashes:

- Goldwater’s nascent but militant conservatism in 1964 allowed Johnson to contrast himself sharply and win the presidential election, with the help of the infamous Daisy ad;
- The ‘white backlash’ of the late 1960s saw whites reacting to the urban riots of 1965-1968. Whites voted overwhelmingly for ‘law and order’ candidate Richard Nixon.
- The riots at the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention caused a long-lasting backlash. Two years later, Lloyd Bentson beat a Democrat incumbent in the Texas Senate primary by running on the Chicago riot issue.
- Gingrich’s budget battle and subsequent “shutdown of the government” in 1995 resulted in broad-based support for Clinton.
- Some observers believe Rosie O’Donnell helped elect George Bush in 2000 with her shrill denunciations of firearms. O’Donnell was a vital part of the gun lobby’s successful GOTV effort.

The case can be made that several smaller political backlashes occurred in the run-up to our recent presidential election: the Wellstone memorial, the CBS forgeries, and the *Guardian’s* Operation Clark County. Does Moore’s movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* belong on this list?

Exhibit (1) The Wellstone Memorial

In Minnesota, Democratic Senator Wellstone’s memorial service was usurped by political zealots who converted it into an anti-Republican rally weeks before the 2002 midterm elections. Republican Senator Trent Lott, who attended to pay his respects, was openly booed.¹⁷ Governor Jesse Ventura walked out in disgust. Sensing damage done, Democratic pollster Mark Penn found that a sizeable 68 percent of voters nationwide had heard of the noxious behavior shown at the memorial service. He also found that 67 percent of independent voters said it made them less likely to vote for a Democrat.¹⁸ The backlash almost certainly helped Republican Norm Coleman take Wellstone’s senate seat from Democrat Walter Mondale.¹⁹ Politicos still argue whether the rally in Minnesota helped Republicans in other states recapture the senate in 2002. Predictably, Democrat

commentators saw little effect, while Republican ones saw a larger one. In several 2002 senatorial elections, Republican surges were observed to occur at the same time the Wellstone memorial story hit its peak. Max Cleland, the Democrat senator from Georgia who lost his seat that year, said: “The reaction to the funeral echoed through Georgia in a powerfully negative way, which angered Republicans even further. So it was an angry electorate that we faced on Election Day.” Cleland added: “I’m not blaming the election on that.”

Exhibit (2) The CBS Forgeries

CBS’ “September Surprise” of forged National Guard records purportedly documented Bush’s malfeasance during his Guard service. The forgeries came by way of Bill Burkett, who coincidentally described himself as “one of the sources” for Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*.²⁰ Even Kerry’s campaign acknowledged that the CBS documents were forgeries, and admitted frustration, since this “distracted attention from legitimate questions about Bush’s Guard service.” The story probably did much more than that—it likely inoculated Bush against a wide range of media attacks, delivering a classic, unintended boomerang effect. Reagan, Clinton, and Dubya all learned how to take advantage of the case-hardening process conferred by ongoing, overblown, and wacky attacks. The beltway playbook states that ‘more attacks are better’ when attempting to tear down a politician, and that makes intuitive sense, but we’ve seen plenty of evidence that the wrong sorts of attacks have the unintended effect of making the target stronger, not weaker. The likes of Begala, Rove, and Carville may believe in The Big Attack Theory as if it were a sacred tenet of faith, but too many weak attacks may actually ‘inoculate’ or ‘teflonize’ a president, diminish the authority of the attackers, and mutilate the credibility of the media foot soldiers that forward the assault. Take the case of CBS’s crying wolf one too many times: A Gallup poll conducted shortly after the CBS forgery scandal found confidence in media accuracy and fairness had dropped to 44%, down from 54% a year ago—not CBS’s intended effect! This meant the media’s credibility had hit its lowest level in three decades. The same poll found that 48% of Americans thought the media was too liberal (as opposed to 15% who thought it too conservative), a perception that certainly advantaged Bush in an America that roots for the put-upon underdog.²¹ On CBS’s *Inside Washington* show, Evan Thomas, a managing editor of *Newsweek*, actually put numbers to the influence boost provided by a left-leaning media:

“There’s one other bias here: the media. Let’s talk a little media bias here. The media, I think, wants Kerry to win. And I think they’re going to portray Kerry and Edwards -- I’m talking about the establishment media, not Fox, but -- they’re going to portray Kerry and Edwards as being young and

dynamic and optimistic and all, there's going to be this glow about them that some, is going to be worth, collectively, the two of them, that's going to be worth maybe 15 points."²²

Of course, it's hard for the established media to deliver 15 points in the midst of a media backlash, when voters are motivated to 'vote against the media' as many commentators have opined.

Exhibit (3) *Guardian's* 'Operation Clark County' in Ohio

The UK's *Guardian* may be great at firing up Britain's Left, but they didn't fully appreciate the psychological phenomenon of reactance when the bright idea of writing letters to the American colonists occurred to them. The *Guardian's* campaign (Operation Clark County) invited readers to urge folks in divided Clark County, Ohio, to vote against Bush, who is frequently depicted in their paper as a semi-literate ape. Soon, citizens throughout Ohio were receiving missives explaining their president's shortcomings to them. Kerry's campaign blanched at the boomerang potential. So did Democrats Abroad: "We all feel it is not a good idea. I think it was unwise. It is so poorly thought-out," said Sharon Manitta, spokeswoman in Britain for Democrats Abroad.²³

What evidence indicated that leftist pressure from the UK might cause a backlash in Ohio? Responses from Ohioans like: "Hey England, Scotland and Wales, mind your own business. We don't need weenie-spined Limeys meddling in our presidential election." To a psychologist, this sort of response screams "Reactance!"

Reactance is the well-established phenomenon that, when confronted with a restriction or loss of freedom, humans tend to react in order to re-establish those freedoms. It's the reason that teenagers fall in love with people their parents don't like. It's the reason that people buy firearms just because they hear that a new gun law will be enacted. It's the reason censorship fails to curb the spread of banned items or ideas. Censorship alone increases human desire to obtain the restricted material, irrespective of what the material is! (Moore himself benefited from this phenomenon when Disney declined to distribute his film because of its political content—Disney did Moore a big favor! Moore was then able to invoke reactance, claim "censorship," and get more airtime.)

So having Brits write and tell Americans how to get their minds right, and how to vote, was a half-baked idea from the outset. The *Guardian* didn't indicate what the ratio of positive-to-negative American responses were, but we can guess; people generally don't like being told what to do or how to vote by foreigners. Here are a few of the responses cataloged in a *Guardian* article titled "Dear Limey

Assholes”:²⁴

- “Real Americans aren't interested in your pansy-ass, tea-sipping opinions. If you want to save the world, begin with your own worthless corner of it.”
- “I just read a hilarious proposal to involve your readership in the upcoming US presidential election. At least, I'm hoping that it is genius satire. Nothing will do more to undermine the Democratic cause in Ohio than having patronising Brits wander around Clark County telling people how to vote...”
- “I used to visit the UK every year. I love the history and culture of your country. But after I heard about your campaign to influence our elections, I've decided that neither myself, nor my family will ever visit again. I'm offended by your campaign...”
- “As an American who is afraid of the terrible ramifications if Bush is elected, I commend your efforts to try to get Britons involved. Although many Americans would be critical of British people ‘meddling’ with our politics and elections, all the world will share in the disaster if Bush is re-elected...”
- “Each email someone gets from some arrogant Brit telling us why to NOT vote for George Bush is going to backfire, you stupid, yellow-toothed pansies. Oh, yeah, and brush your **** teeth, you filthy animals.”

If responses like these prevailed, it signaled a persuasive backlash and woefully inept influence at work. For their part, the *Guardian* briefly defended their position: “It has been an operation to give our readers an opportunity to express their opinions,” a *Guardian* editor sniffed, wrapping himself in the banner of free speech and self-expression.

But the *Guardian* cancelled the project within a short 24 hours of the first batch of letters sent. Why? They saw an immediate backlash! The letters were energizing the opposition. As the *News Telegraph* reported: “The missives led to widespread complaints about foreign interference in a US election. It also prompted a surge of indignant local voters calling the county's Republican party offering to volunteer for Mr. Bush... There had been mounting evidence that urging foreigners to send anti-Bush letters to Clark County—an isolated slice of the rural mid-West—was only hurting Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate.”²⁵

Why Backlash?

Why do influence attempts backlash? I can think of three reasons: 1) the message repulses the audience as inappropriate or extreme (like the Wellstone memorial); 2) the message is recognized as an attempt to manipulate, so the messenger loses credibility while the audience raises their cognitive defenses (as happened with CBS's forgeries); or 3) the message energizes the opposition (like the *Guardian's* campaign). Is it possible that one of these three responses could have occurred to Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*? Let's examine them in turn.

Was *Fahrenheit 9/11* Seen as Inappropriate or Extreme?

Social science research shows that overly extreme messages cause a boomerang effect, where attempted persuasion has the unintended consequence of turning on itself with results that are precisely the *opposite* of what the persuader intended. P. Diddy acknowledged this truth after election day: he says he now realizes he shouldn't have told America's youth to vote George W. Bush's "ass out of office... instead of attacking Bush, it would be better to light a flame under young Americans and let them make the decisions."²⁶ (Apparently, Diddy was unable to motivate even his own "Vote Or Die" campaign poster girl Paris Hilton. Although she made it to the photo studio for the poster shoot, she was among the millions of youths who didn't make it to the polls on November 2.²⁷)

Boomerang effects may occur because the audience is more motivated to argue against extreme messages,²⁸ or possibly because the audience disparages the messenger as lacking in credibility.²⁹ Moore didn't step away from his movie and let it do its work. Therefore, viewers may have reacted to the movie, or to the person of Moore himself—it's hard to disentangle them. Either way, "[Moore] lost it by making unfair attacks on Bush, when he could have made fair attacks."³⁰ Assuming the role of liberal icon, Moore may have served as a constraining anchor on Kerry's left. Less visible Democrat icons may have been more articulate, more similar, more attractive, and more credible—but Moore wasn't in the mood to share the limelight.

The difficulty for the influencer is in determining what precisely constitutes an unfair attack or an extreme message. It turns out, no surprise, that 'extremity' is in the eye of the beholder. But Moore saw persuasive opportunity with all of his three audiences. Of his leftist base he said, "I want to preach to the choir."³¹ Of his most important audience, the undecided voter, he said, "Any swing voters that see my movie will leave having swung."³² Of the Right he said, "...this is a red-state movie. Republican states are embracing the movie, and it's sold out in Republican strongholds all over the country."³³ Whether these lines were spoken by Moore-the-Partisan or Moore-the-Entrepreneur isn't clear.

What is clear is that about 8-9% of Americans choose to see the movie.³⁴ Those viewers overwhelmingly belonged to a narrow political segment. A *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 92% of the film's audience favored Kerry.³⁵ For all we know, that 92% walked into the movie with the same conviction; by any measure this movie appears to have been viewed overwhelmingly by Kerry's base. More informative is that 89% of viewers found *Fahrenheit 9/11* to be somewhat or completely accurate, leaving just 9% who felt it was somewhat or completely inaccurate. Given the many and obvious distortions, inaccuracies, deceptions, and persuasive intent found in the film,³⁶ this number may be a better measure of pre-film audience partisanship.

Any evidence of repulsion or backlash from left base? No, the base did *not* consider the film inappropriate or extreme. Partisans appear to be uniquely immune to sensing inappropriate or overly-extreme arguments. Just as the hard Right was buzzing over the conspiracy of Vince Foster's blood on Clinton's hands, so the hard Left will be buzzing about Bush-Bin Laden connections and steal-the-vote conspiracies for years to come. For true believers, the flimsiest support, or lack of it, will do just fine. Evidence is optional at the fringes.

The *LA Times* found the film "to be wielding less influence among potential voters than the filmmaker and his supporters might have hoped...*Fahrenheit 9/11* is drawing an overwhelmingly Democratic audience, and of the Republicans who have ventured to see it, few appear to be swayed." Completely predictable reactions from the Left and the Right.

But what about the all-important independent voters? Did they swing as predicted? An important insight into their thinking is revealed in the results of the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey:³⁷ "a third of the independents who saw the movie said it made them think worse of Bush." Only a third? we wonder. The Annenberg survey then adds this cautionary note: "...those independents who watched the movie were much more liberal than independents generally and had been three times more likely to back Al Gore than Bush in 2000." So let's recap: That means approximately 75% (3:1) of the independents who watched the movie had voted for Gore, and of these left-leaning independents, approximately 33% thought worse of Bush after viewing Moore's film. If we assume for a moment that the film had *no conversion effect at all*, just a polarizing one—in other words, that it didn't cause anyone to change positions, it only moved people further in the direction they were already headed--we would expect about *three-quarters* of independent viewers to think worse of Bush after the film, *not one-third*. But it didn't even do that. So how do we explain the 42% of independents (three-quarters minus one-third) that should have swung against Bush, and should have thought worse of him after seeing the movie?³⁸ That's a mystery that leaves a boomerang among independents as a possibility.

Was *Fahrenheit 9/11* Recognized as an Attempt to Manipulate Opinion?

Was *Fahrenheit 9/11* generally recognized as an attempt to influence opinion? Largely, yes. The Left thought that was wonderful, and the Right resented it deeply—such is the nature of humanity that we can tolerate "good" propaganda but are intolerant of "bad" propaganda. And the great part of being a human is: each of us gets to choose which is which. The political Center seems to have recognized the film for what it was: an extended political advertisement. Maggie Renzi, *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s producer, said: "People ask if we're trying to affect the election. Absolutely yes."³⁹ Even Moore didn't attempt to disguise the purpose of

the film (how could he?). The big, unanswered question is whether this open attempt to persuade was successful in winning hearts and minds. (We know it was wildly successful in making Moore rich.)

A frequent comment heard in the Left's camp was that Moore's film was timely, necessary, important, compelling, brilliant...but darn it, it presented a big, fat target on the top of a hill that was easy to shoot at. Take for example the remark of the leftish reviewer who said, "He infuriates me because he makes my arguments badly."⁴⁰ Or the respondent in the *LA Times* poll who said, "I'm not a fan of the president. If Michael Moore had done the film more truthfully, I would have been more impressed with it. But I agree with the main premise."⁴¹

It wasn't unusual for opinions from audience members of *Fahrenheit 9/11* to strike cynical or meta-critical stances that openly acknowledged the one-sided influence techniques used in the film:

- "[It] feels like we're being manipulated into thinking a certain way. If Moore had simply left the moment to speak for itself, instead of using the camera to 'enhance' the moment, the moment would have had a much larger impact..."
- "It's an entertaining movie, with some laughs and some effective cutting and pasting to distort the facts and make implications without getting TOO far out on a limb--and effective use of music to manipulate our emotions. He's clearly a master propagandist..."
- "He (Moore) knows he can manipulate the vast library of available tape to 'say' anything he wants it to. It is his stock and trade. It's the same as what they say about statistics--you can get them to say anything you want..."

The problem with one-sided communications is this: they invite (perhaps *provoke* is the better word) the viewer to argue against the communication. That's basic human reactance at work. And when people come up with their own objections, they love them like their own children. This is the reason students of influence such as myself always emphasize to our clients that one-sided arguments are *only* effective with (1) the already persuaded who are looking for further evidence to buttress their positions; and (2) those who will not come into contact with arguments from the other side (a remote possibility in a media-heavy presidential election). One-sided arguments in a two-sided environment call on people to investigate the arguments, to manufacture their own objections to them, and to save public face by letting others know that they themselves were not duped, manipulated, or persuaded against their will.

Moore has published a new book, where he explores US international relations. The title of the book is *Will They Ever Trust Us Again?* That same

question could handily be asked of Moore's viewers: *Will Audiences Ever Trust Moore Again?* For most influence "tricks," a *recognized* influence tactic is an *ineffective* influence tactic. Perhaps all the people who thought the movie *was* persuasive were simply the people who *were hoping it would be* persuasive.

Did *Fahrenheit 9/11* Energize the Opposition?

Did Moore and *Fahrenheit 9/11* energize the opposition? This answer is easy: you bet it did. And herein may lie *Fahrenheit 9/11's* largest potential backlash effect. In politics as in physics, every action has a reaction. What one side sees as a promising assault, the other can leverage to its own purposes. For example, toward the end of the campaign, we saw the remarkable instance of the Bush campaign using MoveOn.org's "Bush=Hitler" ads *in their own ads!* Extreme attacks can arm the opponent, and severe actions can have severe reactions. Put another way, in the words of one of the *Guardian's* contributors:

"We put together an unprecedented ground operation, but it was matched by the zealots on the right. We experienced an explosion in the blog world and started a nascent liberal radio network, but our message machine was far outmatched by the rightwing noise machine... We put forth quality candidates in races nationwide, only to see most outclassed and outgunned..."⁴²

First, there were the direct responses to the film itself: *Michael Moore Hates America*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Celsius 41.11*, *Weapon of Mass Destruction: The Murderous Reign of Saddam Hussein*, *Confronting Iraq*, and *Michael & Me*.⁴³ It's likely that future Moore movies will meet with vigorous video defenses, if the Right rises to the challenge of a persuasion medium that all but belongs to the Left. But more effective than these film responses was Moore's persona as a threat to the Right; as a frightening, powerful opponent that galvanized and rallied Republicans.

Some have proposed Moore lost the election for Kerry because he was the first to sling mud over Viet Nam-era service.⁴⁴ Moore's criticism of Bush's guard service allowed an opening for the Swift Boat Veterans to respond on the same topic, without appearing to have thrown the first stone. Political influence experts like Dick Morris become positively gleeful when the opponent comes at them with a weak negative attack. Why? It allows them to go negative in turn, without looking like vicious attackers—merely indignant defenders. Listen to Morris as he recalls the Clinton/Dole duel in 1996:

“The side throwing the negative is at a gross disadvantage. Voters have become so suspect of negative ads that the side counterpunching in rebuttal has the advantage...I worried that [Dole] wouldn't take the bait and would begin his race with positive ads. ...But he didn't. He pulled the positive ad and went on the attack. Once on the attack, we could—and did—rebut each of his charges and then counterpunch with negatives of our own.”⁴⁵

Even more evidence of Moore's usefulness to Republicans came at the Republican Convention in New York. McCain took aim at Michael Moore (sitting in the audience) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* when he referred to a “disingenuous film maker who would have us believe that Saddam's Iraq was an oasis of peace, when in fact it was a place of indescribable cruelty, torture chambers, mass graves and prisons...”⁴⁶ The audience was visibly energized as they rose up and booed. Moore noticed this energy himself, and wrote that “[They] booed my name more loudly than Saddam's or Osama's.”⁴⁷ That should have been a clue to Moore of his unwitting complicity in Bush's strategy to take back the White House. A common enemy is a powerful uniting force, especially when that enemy is a brother from Michigan rather than a thug from Baghdad. And Moore was cooperative enough to turn up at the Republican Convention as ‘Exhibit A’ in the Republican Hall of Bogeymen. As we say in Los Angeles, “Moore got played.”

Moore was “played” elsewhere, too: he was used as a rallying tool by the RNC in Colorado, who urged voters in ads to vote against Eastern and Hollywood

elitists “like Michael Moore.” Moore was the only person mentioned by name. (The Republicans won Colorado.)

In Pennsylvania, Ginny Schraeder, Democratic contender for an open house seat, hosted a fundraiser at a screening of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Republicans sent out a mailer critical of Schraeder’s self-association with Moore and the “hate America crowd.” A confrontational debate followed, where Schraeder defended her Moore connection and then walked out of the debate. (Schraeder lost the seat to Republican contender Mike Fitzpatrick.)

In his column, “How Michael Moore Got Bush Elected,”⁴⁸ Jay Ambrose opines that “literally millions of the hard-working, responsible, decent citizens of this nation just may have had it up to their eyebrows with those Hollywood types and others who disdain their intelligence, mock their religion, dismiss their values, deprecate their lifestyles and disparage their social contributions.” It may be the election results were no more complicated than basic human reactance finding its say at the polls.

Conclusion

It’s frustrating not to have an airtight, data-driven answer to *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s effects (pro, con, or lack of them) on the 2004 election. Moore is an accomplished director who has mastered at least eleven classic propaganda tactics, a topic I addressed in *Propaganda & Fahrenheit 9/11*.⁴⁹ But the potential that Moore’s movie was persuasively ineffective, or caused the opposite of its intended effect, appears to be a possibility. Let’s review the three potential paths to backlash: (1) Was *Fahrenheit 9/11* seen as inappropriate or extreme? To the left base, no; to the right base, yes; but the middle appeared to be disproportionately unpersuaded by the film. The results of the Annenberg survey leave the door open to the possibility of extreme message rejection. (2) Was *Fahrenheit 9/11* recognized as an attempt to influence? Largely, yes—it appears that relatively few people took the film as fact-based documentary. It was recognized by audiences as a one-sided political argument, and one-sided arguments tend to invite countering arguments from those who haven’t sworn allegiance to the advocated side.⁵⁰ Finally, (3) did *Fahrenheit 9/11* energize the opposition? No doubt about it. Moore took on the American Right—in the process, he won himself fame and millions of dollars, while quite possibly helping Bush win the election at the same time. As one savvy observer commented, “Don’t expect Michael Moore to be invited to sit in the Presidential box at the 2008 DNC.”⁵¹

Will this electoral setback bring us a chastened Moore? Not likely. With *Fahrenheit 9/11* grossing above \$150 million at the US box office, why should the failure to influence an election slow him down—why wouldn’t it simply make him try harder next time? Moore is already working on *Fahrenheit 9/11 and 1/2*,

rumored to be released shortly before the next presidential campaign.⁵² Moore is learning the influence craft as he goes. He has money and talent and the desire to win. If he's clever, he'll adjust, adapt, and refine his techniques. He'd be much more effective if he were subtler and more truthful; he's a clever man, so he'll likely come to this insight on his own. I expect his future movies to rely less on polemical arguments and more on emotional stories, which are harder to refute because they are felt, not reasoned. When credible, film has the ability to effectively persuade "below the radar." In comparison to polemical argumentation, social science research shows that audiences lower their cognitive defenses when listening to involving and emotional stories. But here's Moore's dilemma: even if his technique gets more subtle and more effective, Moore *The Icon* is unlikely to slip beneath anyone's radar—unless he is able to miraculously rehabilitate himself into a more reasonable and thoughtful persona. If he can accomplish this, Moore may be able to claim victory next time. If Republicans can't master his medium and create better films than he can, his chances are that much better.

¹ Cokie Roberts Blames Michael Moore. December 19, 2004. Newsmax, citing Robert's appearance on the Chris Matthews Show.

<http://www.newsmax.com/archives/ic/2004/12/19/121632.shtml>

² M. Savlov. 6/25/04. Fahrenheit 9/11. Austin Chronicle.

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gbase/Calendar/Film?Film=oid%3A217267>

³ W Lester. June 29, 2004. Republicans Beware: Fahrenheit 9/11 Boosts Public Interest in War. Associated Press. <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines04/0629-03.htm>

⁴ For a sampling, see: T Neal. June 25 2004. Buzz Around Moore's Movie May Be Able to Shake the Election. Washington Post. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A4566-2004Jun25.html>. M Lavine. 29 June 04. Moore's Fahrenheit Breaks Records. Herald Sun.

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M Warren. Oct 27 2004. Moore's Manifesto: Sleep Till Noon, Drink Beer, Vote Kerry. News Telegraph. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2004/10/27/wus127.xml>

⁵ J. Horn. July 23 2004. "Public Keeping its Cool over Election Effect of Fahrenheit 9/11." Los Angeles Times. Pg. E.1 <http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/2004/complete/la-et-horn23jul23,1,7534526.story?coll=la-elect2004-complete>

⁶ Kevin Ray. Fahrenheit 9/11 just leftist propaganda. The Battalion. Thursday, July 1, 2004. <http://www.thebatt.com/news/2004/07/01/Opinion/Fahrenheit.911.Just.Leftist.Propaganda-690957.shtml>

⁷ Viewer Finds Moore 'On Firm Ground.' June 18 2004. International Herald Tribune. <http://www.iht.com/articles/525560.html>

⁸ J Harkness. June 2004. Moore Set for Attack. Now Toronto.

http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2004-06-24/movie_feature.php

⁹ M. Moore. 9/1/04. The Ebert and McCain Show. USA Today.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-08-31-moore_x.htm

¹⁰ The reference is to Moore's remark that the Slacker's credo on election day would be "Sleep till noon, drink beer, and vote for Kerry November 2."

¹¹ L. Vanderkam. 11/3/2004. The Youth Vote: It Didn't Rock. USA Today.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/2004-11-03-youth-vote-vanderkam_x.htm

¹² Fee, Gayle. Did Celebs for Kerry Whip Up a Backlash? Boston Herald. Nov 4, 2004.

<http://thetrack.bostonherald.com/moreTrack/view.bg?articleid=52465&format=>

¹³ Morano M. Michael Moore Uses US War Dead in Anti-Bush Message. CNS News.com. Nov 4, 2004.

<http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewNation.asp?Page=%5CNation%5Carchive%5C200411%5CNAT20041104f.html>

¹⁴ M. Moore. 9/2/04. Why Democrats Shouldn't Be Scared. USA Today.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/columnist/2004-09-02-moore_x.htm

¹⁵ Staff. 06/11/2004. Moore means less. Take a bow, Mike: you've done it again. Telegraph.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2004/11/06/dl0603.xml&sSheet=/opinion/2004/11/06/ixoplead.html>

¹⁶ Reuters. Moore denies he hurt Kerry's campaign. Dec. 7, 2004.

<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6665034/>

¹⁷ John Kerry called Trent Lott after the memorial to apologize for the behavior of the attendees.

¹⁸ T. Webb. Oct 30, 2003. Wellstone memorial service: local fame or national infamy? St Paul Pioneer Press. <http://www.twincities.com/mld/pioneerpress/news/politics/7136351.htm?1c>

¹⁹ M. Cooper. Nov 9, 2002. Fallout from a Memorial. Time Online Magazine.

<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,388903,00.html>

²⁰ M. Hosenball and M. Isikoff. Sept 27, 2004. CBS News: A Source of Connection. Newsweek.

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6039850/site/newsweek/>

²¹ M. Gillespie. Sept 23, 2004. Media Credibility Hits Lowest Point in Three Decades. Gallup

Poll. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/content/login.aspx?ci=13132>

²² <http://www.mediaresearch.org/cyberalerts/2004/cyb20040712.asp>

²³ Reuters. UK Oct 20, 2004. Anti-Bush Letters Spark Outrage. CNN.

<http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/10/19/britain.letters.reut/>

²⁴ Having censored some of the original language in my quotes, I virtually assured that this footnote will be the most frequently referenced one in the article. Responses both positive and negative to the Guardian's campaign can be found in: Dear Limey Assholes. October 18, 2004. Guardian Unlimited.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uselections2004/story/0,13918,1329858,00.html>. We have no idea if they are showing us a representative sample or not.

²⁵ D Rennie. Nov 10 2004. Guardian calls it quits in Clark County fiasco. News Telegraph.

<http://news.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2004/10/22/wus22.xml&sSheet=/news/2004/10/22/ixnewstop.html>. Since this is a footnote, I'll share the humorous final paragraphs of the article here: "Yet there is one last Guardian letter Mrs. Rosicka would still like to see - one containing a cheque for \$25 (about £13), which the newspaper still owes her for its purchase of the county's electoral roll. "I was nice and made the file available, because their reporter said he was right on deadline," she said. "They said the cheque is in the mail. As of this morning, it still hasn't arrived, and it's been more than a week."

²⁶ See P. Diddy Exhausted After 'Running Wild' On Election Day. 11/2/04. MTV.com.

<http://www.mtv.com/chooseorlose/headlines/news.jhtml?id=1493383>

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- ²⁷ Fee, Gayle. Did Celebs for Kerry Whip Up a Backlash? Boston Herald. Nov 4, 2004. <http://thetrack.bostonherald.com/moreTrack/view.bg?articleid=52465&format=>
- ²⁸ T. Brock (1967). Communication discrepancy and intent to persuade as determinants of counterargument production. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 3, 296-309.
- ²⁹ E. Aronson, J.A. Turner & J.M. Carlsmith (1963). Communicator credibility and communication discrepancy determinants of opinion change. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67, 31-36.
- ³⁰ J. Jarvis. November 6 2004. Michael Moore Lost the Election. Buzz Machine. http://www.buzzmachine.com/archives/2004_11_07.html#008424
- ³¹ J Harkness. June 2004. Moore Set for Attack. Now Toronto. http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2004-06-24/movie_feature.php
- ³² K. Ray. July 1 2004. Fahrenheit 9/11 just leftist propaganda. The Battalion. <http://www.thebatt.com/news/2004/07/01/Opinion/Fahrenheit.911.Just.Leftist.Propaganda-690957.shtml>
- ³³ S. Waxman. June 28, 2004. Fahrenheit 9/11 Is Highest Grossing Documentary Of All Time! The New York Times
- ³⁴ This number is supported by three polls: LA Times (9%), Annenberg, (8%) and Opinion Works (9%). Moore reached one more percent of the population than did Rush Limbaugh within the week of being surveyed, at 7% reach of the American public (Annenberg data). Some sources say that 20-30% of adults viewed the movie.
- ³⁵ The LA Times Poll was of 1529 registered voters. Change of opinion could not measured, since no control group or before-after methodology was in place. Representativeness of the sample is unknown. J. Horn. July 23 2004. "Public Keeping its Cool over Election Effect of Fahrenheit 9/11." Los Angeles Times. Pg. E.1 <http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/2004/complete/la-et-horn23jul23,1,7534526.story?coll=la-elect2004-complete>. Regarding the 92% pro-Kerry audience in the LA Times poll, the Annenberg study found it to be lower at 70%.
- ³⁶ Articles on the deceptions, distortions, and inaccuracies of Fahrenheit 9/11 abound. One of the most thorough and technical is D. Kopel's "59 Deceits in Fahrenheit 9/11," at <http://www.davekopel.com/Terror/Fiftysix-Deceits-in-Fahrenheit-911.htm>
- ³⁷ This study had 5051 respondents and in terms of quality, appears to be one of the best studies of the Fahrenheit 9/11 effect. A. Clymer. August 3 2004. Fahrenheit 9/11 Viewers and Limbaugh Listeners About Equal In Size Even Though They Perceive Two Different Nations, Annenberg Data Show. University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey. www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_fahrenheit_08-03_pr.pdf
- ³⁸ This odd lack-of-effect is duplicated in the numbers for Democrats, too. The Annenberg poll found that 55% of viewers identified themselves as Democrats, but only 41% of them said the picture made them feel worse about Bush, a gap of 14%. Aha, you may say, this is a floor effect! Democrats couldn't feel any worse than they already did! That may have been what they were saying, or may not, but it's harder to argue for floor effects in independent and swing voters. By the way, the Annenberg percentage of Democrats seeing the film (55%) is quite a bit lower than the LA Times estimate (84%) and the Opinion Works Poll (78%). In any of these numbers, there is a possibility that subjects can strategically misrepresent themselves to manipulate the persuasion effect. For example, a Democrat calling himself a Republican can then register

movement to the left, making it appear as if the film were more persuasive than it was. This is one way that poll participants can “vote” inside a study.

³⁹ Quote pulled for the Denver Post. See

http://unconventionalwisdom.typepad.com/unconventional_wisdom/2004/06/fahrenheit_911_.html

⁴⁰ M. Labash 07/05/2004 Un-Moored from Reality. Fahrenheit 9/11 connects dots that aren't there. Weekly Standard.

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/004/278rxzvb.asp?pg=2>

⁴¹ J. Horn. July 23 2004. “Public Keeping its Cool over Election Effect of Fahrenheit 9/11.” Los Angeles Times. Pg. E.1

⁴² M. Moulitsas. Nov 3 2004. Divide and rule ... for now. Guardian Unlimited.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uselections2004/markosmoulitsas/story/0,15139,1342263,00.html>

⁴³ Fahrenhype is rumored to have distributed 200,000 copies by the end of October 2004, see:

<http://www.moorelies.com/news/cats/display.cfm?catID=24>. It should be noted that these received a small fraction of the distribution of the anti-Bush films: *Control Room*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Going Upriver: The Long War of John Kerry*, *Outfoxed*, *Power Trip*, *Silver City*, *The Hunting of the President*, *The Yes Men*, and *Uncovered: The War on Iraq*. Some would add mainstream movies such as *The Corporation*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, and *The Manchurian Candidate* to this list. See E. Blank. 'Celsius 41.11' provides some political balance. Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. October 23, 2004. <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1255371/posts>.

⁴⁴ J. Jarvis. November 6 2004. Michael Moore Lost the Election. Buzz Machine.

http://www.buzzmachine.com/archives/2004_11_07.html#008424

⁴⁵ D. Morris. (1999). Behind the Oval Office: Getting Reelected Against All Odds. Los Angeles: St. Martin's Press. page 271.

⁴⁶ Staff Reports. 8/30/2004. Michael Moore Draws Boos at Republican Convention. USA Today.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/president/2004-08-30-gop-moore_x.htm

⁴⁷ M. Moore. 9/1/04. The Ebert and McCain Show. USA Today.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-08-31-moore_x.htm

⁴⁸ J. Ambrose. Nov 6 2004. How Michael Moore Got Bush Elected. The Union Leader.

http://www.theunionleader.com/articles_showfast.html?article=46653

⁴⁹ K. Rhoads. 9/11/04. Propaganda Tactics and Fahrenheit 9/11.

<http://www.workingpsychology.com/fahrenheit.html>

⁵⁰ Dr. Jamieson, of the Annenberg Public Policy Center had this to say about Fahrenheit 9/11:

“One-sided partisan communication tends to attract an audience of believers and reinforces their beliefs rather than change their minds. Even when such communication attracts people who know they will disagree but want to see what the other side is saying, it tends to reinforce their partisanship because they develop counter arguments.”

⁵¹ Robert Cox. Nov 3 2004. <http://www.thenationaldebate.com/blog/>

⁵² Reuters. November 12, 2004. Moore heat: 9/11.5.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/People/Moore-heat-911-Mk-11/2004/11/12/1100227564077.html?oneclick=true>