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## Fahrenheit 9/11: The temperature at which Michael Moore's pants burn

By [Brendan Nyhan](#)  
July 2, 2004

Michael Moore's career as a rabble-rousing populist has been marked by a frequent pattern of dissembling and factual inaccuracy. He [distorted](#) the chronology of his first movie, "Roger & Me"; [repeatedly peddled](#) the myth that the Bush administration gave \$43 million to the Taliban; published two books, [Stupid White Men](#) and [Dude, Where's My Country?](#), that were riddled with factual errors and distortions; and won an Academy Award for "Bowling for Columbine," a documentary based on [a confused and often contradictory argument](#) that features [altered footage](#) of a Bush-Quayle campaign ad, [a misleading presentation](#) of a speech by National Rifle Association president Charlton Heston, and other [factual distortions](#).

With his new documentary "Fahrenheit 9/11," which won the prestigious Palme D'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and was #1 at the US box office last week, Moore has surged to new prominence -- and come under increasing scrutiny. His staff has made much of [elaborate fact-checking](#) that was reportedly conducted on the film. And fortunately, it appears to be free of the silly and obvious errors that have plagued Moore's past work, such as [the claim](#) in *Stupid White Men* that the Pentagon planned to spend \$250 billion on the Joint Strike Fighter in 2001, a sum that represented over 80 percent of the total defense budget request for the year.

However, "Fahrenheit 9/11" is filled with a series of deceptive half-truths and carefully phrased insinuations that Moore does not adequately back up. As Washington Monthly blogger [Kevin Drum](#) and others have noted, the irony is that these are [the same tactics](#) frequently used by the target of the film, George W. Bush. Moore and his chief

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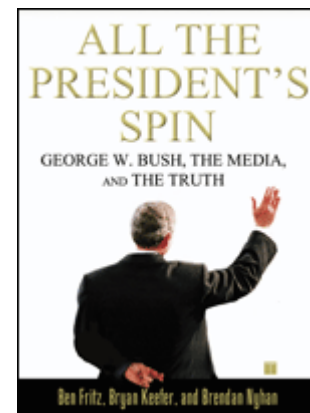
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### [Upcoming appearances](#)

-Sept. 22, 5:15 PM EST: Bryan Keefe will appear on MSNBC's "Lester Holt Live."  
-Sept. 23, 1-2 PM CST: Ben Fritz will appear on WILL Urbana, Ill.'s "Afternoon Magazine."  
-Sept. 28, 7 PM PST: Ben Fritz will appear on KXLU's

antagonist have more in common than viewers might think.

## The 2000 Florida recount

Reviewing the 2000 election during the opening of the film, Moore uses a quote from CNN legal commentator Jeffrey Toobin to make a deeply misleading suggestion about the results of the media recounts conducted in Florida:

Moore: And even if numerous independent investigations prove that Gore got the most votes --

Toobin: If there was a statewide recount, under every scenario, Gore won the election.

Moore: -- it won't matter just as long as all your daddy's friends on the Supreme Court vote the right way.

But the recount conducted by a consortium of media organizations found something quite different, as [Newsday recently pointed out](#). If the statewide recount ordered by the Florida Supreme Court had gone ahead, the consortium found that Bush [would have won](#) the election under two different scenarios: counting only "undervotes," or taking into account the reported intentions of some county electoral officials to include "overvotes" as well. During the CNN appearance from which Moore draws the clip, reporter Candy Crowley [explained](#) that Toobin's analysis assumed the statewide consideration of "overvotes," which was not a sure thing, though there are [indications](#) that Leon County Circuit Court judge Terry Lewis, who was supervising the recount, might have directed counties to consider them.

## The Saudi flights

In another scene, Moore suggests that members of Osama Bin Laden's family and other Saudis were able to fly out of the country while air traffic was grounded after September 11. After an initial report in Newsweek [inaccurately characterized](#) the scene, saying it had made a direct claim to that effect, Moore's staff [replied](#) with a legalistic parsing. The film does accurately date the Saudi flights out of the country to "after September 13" as they claim (flights leaving the country resumed on the 14th), but Moore does not take the important step of explaining the meaning of this date in the film:

"Centerstage".

-Oct. 3, 5 PM EST: Bryan Keefer will take part in a panel discussion after a performance of "Nobody's Lunch" at the [PS 122 theater](#) in New York City.

-Oct. 4, 7 PM EST: Brendan Nyhan will give a book reading at Regulator Bookshop in Durham, NC.

-Oct. 13, 8:30 PM EST: Brendan Nyhan will take part in a panel discussion of the presidential debate at Duke University's Griffith Theater.

-Oct. 19: Bryan Keefer takes on Joe Scarborough in a debate sponsored by the [Smith Family Foundation](#), CUNY Graduate Center, New York City.

-Oct. 21: Bryan Keefer will appear on KGO San Francisco's "The Pete Wilson Show."

-Oct. 21: Bryan Keefer will give a book reading at Books Inc. in Mountain View, CA.

### [Spinsanity in the news](#)

-Bryan Keefer publishes [an article](#) on media coverage of campaign 2004 from a young person's perspective in the Washington Post Outlook section.

-[Great reviews](#) of [All the President's Spin](#) appear in the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Tampa Tribune and the Los Altos Town Crier.

-Altnet publishes [an excerpt](#) from [All the President's Spin](#) as well as [an interview](#) with the authors about the book.

-[All the President's Spin](#) reaches #14 on the New York Times bestseller list for paperback nonfiction!

-A Publisher's Weekly Online [review](#) calls [All the President's Spin](#) a "lucid critique" and a "passionate indictment" that is "[w]ell organized and heavily referenced."

**Moore:** In the days following September 11, all commercial and private airline traffic was grounded... [video clips] Not even Ricky Martin could fly. But really, who wanted to fly? No one, except the Bin Ladens.

**Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND):** We had some airplanes authorized at the highest levels of our government to fly to pick up Osama Bin Laden's family members and others from Saudi Arabia and transport them out of this country.

**Moore:** It turns out that the White House approved planes to pick up the Bin Ladens and numerous other Saudis. At least six private jets and nearly two dozen commercial planes carried the Saudis and the Bin Ladens out of the US after September 13th. In all, 142 Saudis, including 24 members of the bin Laden family, were allowed to leave the country.

Given that Moore states that "In the days following September 11, all commercial and private airline traffic was grounded," how are viewers to know that this description did not include the Saudi flights out of the country? The "after September 13th" clause may show that Moore's claim was technically accurate, but it leaves viewers with the distinct impression that the Bin Ladens left the country before others were allowed to.

### **Saudi investments and business relationships**

Moore also uses the power of insinuation to play on the relationship between the Bush family and the Bin Ladens. The facts are thin, but that doesn't stop him from making ominous suggestions about the connections between the two.

After discussing the September 11 attacks, Moore presents clips from an interview between Saudi Arabia's Prince Bandar and CNN's Larry King in which Bandar describes Osama Bin Laden as a "simple and very quiet guy." Moore then intones the following over video of Bush in a Florida classroom after being told of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center:

Hmm. A simple and quiet guy whose family who just happened to have a business relationship with the family of George W. Bush. Is that what

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he was thinking about? Because if the public knew this, it wouldn't look very good.

"Just happened" to have a business relationship? What does Moore mean? He doesn't say precisely, of course, but he draws a series of tenuous and often circumstantial links between Bin Laden family investments and Bush's actions as President.

For instance, Moore shows that the White House blacked out the name of another Texas Air National Guard pilot who was suspended along with Bush - James R. Bath - in service records released earlier this year. He suggests that the White House was not concerned about privacy and instead wanted to hide Bath's links to Bush:

Why didn't Bush want the press and the public to see Bath's name on his military records? Perhaps he was worried that the American people would find out that at one time James R. Bath was the Texas money manager for the Bin Ladens.

Moore notes that Bath was retained by Salem Bin Laden, and describes Bush's founding of the Arbusto oil company. James Moore, an author, appears next, saying in an interview that "there's no indication" Bush Sr. funded Arbusto and that the source of the firm's investments is unknown. Michael Moore then piles on the innuendo in his narration:

So where did George W. Bush get his money?... [archival clip of Bush saying "I'm George Bush"] One person who did invest in him was James R. Bath. Bush's good friend James Bath was hired by the Bin Laden family to manage its money in Texas and invest in businesses. And James Bath himself in turn invested in George W. Bush.

This phrasing suggests that Bath invested Bin Laden family money in Arbusto. But as Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball [note](#) in an online Newsweek column and Matt Labash [points out](#) in a Weekly Standard article on the film, Bath has stated this investment was his money, not the Bin Ladens'. Moore presents no evidence to the contrary.

The film also notes investments in United Defense, a military contractor, by the Carlyle Group, a firm that Bush and his father have been involved with which counts members of the Bin Laden family among its investors. He



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**states:**

**September 11 guaranteed that United Defense was going to have a very good year. Just six weeks after 9/11, Carlyle filed to take United Defense public and in December, made a one-day profit of \$237 million. But sadly, with so much attention focused on the Bin Laden family being important Carlyle investors, the Bin Ladens eventually had to withdraw.**

**Moore's phrasing suggests that the Bin Ladens profited from the post-Sept. 11 buildup with the United Defense IPO but were forced to withdraw after the stock sale. However, Labash [notes](#) that the Bin Ladens withdrew *before* the initial filing, not afterward, missing the big payday Moore insinuates that they received.**

**Finally, Moore drops a big number - \$1.4 billion - claiming "That's how much the Saudi royals and their associates have given the Bush family, their friends and their related businesses in the past three decades," adding that "\$1.4 billion doesn't just buy a lot of flights out of the country. It buys a lot of love." But Isikoff and Hosenball [show](#) that nearly 90% of that total comes from contracts awarded by the Saudi government to BDM, a defense contractor owned by Carlyle. But when the contracts were awarded and BDM received the Saudi funds, Bush Sr. had no official involvement with the firm, though he made one paid speech and took an overseas trip on its behalf. He didn't actually join Carlyle's Asian advisory board until after the firm had sold BDM. And though George W. Bush had previously served on the board of another Carlyle company, he left it before BDM received the first Saudi contract. As usual, the connections are loose and circumstantial at best.**

### **Afghanistan/Iraq/homeland security motives**

**Moore also offers a number of suggestions that the Bush administration's military actions abroad and efforts to increase homeland security were motivated by nefarious hidden agendas.**

**For instance, here is his description of the US campaign against the Taliban government of Afghanistan:**

**The United States began bombing Afghanistan just four weeks after 9/11. Mr. Bush said he was doing so because the Taliban government of Afghanistan had been harboring Bin Laden...**

**[montage of clips of Bush saying the US would "smoke out" Bin Laden] For all his tough talk, Bush really didn't do much.**

**Moore then shows former counterterrorism advisor Richard Clarke criticizing the war, saying it took two months for US special forces to be deployed in the area of Afghanistan where Bin Laden was hiding. This fact is portrayed as an indication of a hidden motive:**

**Two months? A mass murderer who attacked the United States was given a two-month head start? Who in their right mind would do that?... [clip of Bush] Or was the war in Afghanistan really about something else? Perhaps the answer was in Houston, Texas.**

**Moore proceeds with the heavy-handed narrative, suggesting he is unraveling the alleged hidden story of the US war in Afghanistan through a series of loose juxtapositions:**

**In 1997, while George W. Bush was governor of Texas, a delegation of Taliban leaders from Afghanistan flew to Houston to meet with Unocal executives to discuss the building of a pipeline through Afghanistan bringing natural gas from the Caspian Sea. And who got a Caspian Sea drilling contract the same day Unocal signed the pipeline deal? A company headed by a man named Dick Cheney: Halliburton.**

**[clips of Bush and Cheney talking about Halliburton from 2000]**

**And who else stood to benefit from the pipeline? Bush's #1 campaign contributor: Kenneth Lay and the good people of Enron. Only the British press covered this trip.**

**Contrary's to Moore's implication, the fact that Bush was governor of Texas at the time of the Taliban/Unocal meeting does nothing to prove that he was somehow involved in the meeting. Governors are obviously not responsible for every business dealing that takes place in their state. Nonetheless, Moore slips his name in to link him to the deal.**

**The filmmaker continues his narration by directly linking**

**the 1997 deal with a 2001 visit to the US by a Taliban envoy:**

**Then, in 2001, just five and a half months before 9/11, the Bush administration welcomed a special Taliban envoy to tour the United States and help improve the image of the Taliban government.**

**[clip of envoy press conference]**

**Here is the Taliban official visiting our State Department to meet with US officials. Why on earth would the Bush administration allow a Taliban leader to visit the United States knowing that the Taliban were harboring the man who bombed the USS Cole and our African embassies? Well, I guess 9/11 put a stop to that.**

**This rhetorical question is entirely disingenuous. Moore suggests that the US was indifferent to the Taliban's harboring of Bin Laden, but Isikoff and Hosenball [point out](#) that the administration met with the envoy in part to discuss the fate of Bin Laden, who they were pressing the Taliban to turn over.**

**Moore then implies that the war was really a front for Unocal to create a pipeline:**

**When the invasion of Afghanistan was complete, we installed its new president, Hamid Karzai. Who was Hamid Karzai? He was a former advisor to Unocal. Bush also appointed as our envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, who was also a former Unocal advisor. I guess you can probably see where this is leading. Faster than you can say black gold Texas tea, Afghanistan signed an agreement with her neighboring countries to build a pipeline through Afghanistan carrying natural gas from the Caspian Sea.**

**But as Ken Silverstein [wrote](#) in The American Prospect back in 2002 and Isikoff and Hosenball [show](#) in their article about "Fahrenheit," Unocal dropped support for the pipeline in 1998 (the company has issued [a press release](#) making this point). In 2002, Afghanistan did [sign](#) the agreement Moore described, but Unocal is not involved in the project, which is still in its planning stages and may never come to fruition.**

Later, Moore presents a series of anecdotal examples of what he sees as misguided efforts to improve homeland security: FBI questioning of a man who made derogatory statements about President Bush at a gym, infiltration of a peace group in Fresno by a sheriff's detective on an anti-terrorism task force, a mother who was forced to drink her breast milk during an airport security screening to prove that it was not a toxic substance, and the decision to allow airline passengers to carry lighters and matches onto planes while banning other items. Again, based on this flimsy collection of evidence, Moore suggests a hidden motive:

Ok, let me see if I got this straight. Old guys in the gym - bad. Peace groups in Fresno - bad. Breast milk - really bad. But matches and lighters on a plane - hey, no problem. Was this really about our safety? Or was something else going on?

He then shows a series of clips arguing that Oregon state troopers are underfunded and have little manpower. Without making any argument about how this relates to the rest of the country or the federal government's actions, Moore jumps right into more implications of conspiracy and nefarious motives, keying off a trooper's wish for a manual on how to catch terrorists:

Of course, the Bush administration didn't hand out a manual on how to deal with the terrorist threat because the terrorist threat wasn't what this was all about. They just wanted us to be fearful enough so that we'd get behind what their real plan was.

Again, Moore's meaning when he says "what this was all about" is unclear, but it appears to be a reference to the emphasis on homeland security after September 11. "Their real plan" is, as the movie later makes clear, a reference to the war in Iraq. But regardless of any previous plans to invade Iraq, the argument makes no sense. The breast milk example, for instance, indicates an overzealous devotion to homeland security, not indifference to it. And Oregon's state budgetary woes are hardly proof that the federal government's homeland security effort was insincere.

### **Ashcroft and the FBI**

In his discussion of homeland security, Moore takes a

cheap shot at John Ashcroft, stating, "In 2000, he was running for re-election as Senator from Missouri against a man who died the month before the election. The voters preferred the dead guy." Of course, the governor of Missouri who succeeded Mel Carnahan, the so-called "dead guy," [had promised](#) to appoint Jean Carnahan, the governor's widow, to the Senate if her late husband won the election, a fact voters [clearly understood](#).

On a more serious note, after suggesting that Ashcroft was unconcerned about terrorism before September 11, Moore uses phrasing that exaggerates how widespread knowledge of the Al Qaeda plot was before the attacks inside the FBI and Justice Department:

[Ashcroft's] own FBI knew that summer that there were Al Qaeda members in the US and that Bin Laden was sending his agents to flight schools around the country. But Ashcroft's Justice Department turned a blind eye and a deaf ear.

This implies far more prior knowledge about flight school activity than actually existed. As the 9/11 Commission [found](#) in a staff statement (72K Adobe PDF), the so-called "Phoenix memo" from an FBI agent in Arizona suggesting a possible effort by Bin Laden to send agents to flight schools was not widely circulated within the FBI and did not reach Ashcroft's desk:

His memo was forwarded to one field office. Managers of the Osama Bin Laden unit and the Radical Fundamentalist unit at FBI headquarters were addressees, but did not even see the memo until after September 11. No managers at headquarters saw the memo before September 11. The New York field office took no action. It was not shared outside the FBI.

Before Sept. 11, the Minneapolis FBI also investigated Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called 20th hijacker, who was enrolled in a flight school there, but no Al Qaeda connections were discovered until after the attacks. Again, saying the FBI "knew" of a plot to send agents to flight schools is overstated.

**"You can't refute what's said in the film"**

During a recent interview on "Late Show with David Letterman," the host identified the problems with the

circumstantial argument of the film in a series of probing questions to Moore:

When you look at the film in total, are there things there - if I were smarter, could I refute some of these points? Shall I believe you that everything means exactly what it looks like? I mean, the presentation is overwhelming, but could a smarter man than me come in and say, "Yes, this happened, but it means nothing," "Yes, that happened but it means nothing"? But put together in a puzzle it creates one inarguable, compelling circumstance.

Moore's response to Letterman (after a joking aside) sums up the problem with his work. Despite proclamations that the film is satirical and represents his opinion, Moore still makes strong claims about its veracity:

You can't refute what's said in the film. It's all there, the facts are all there, the footage is all there.

Sadly, as with most of Moore's work, this is simply not true.

Update 7/8 8:42 AM EST: A shorter version of this article [appeared](#) today in the Philadelphia Inquirer.

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