

July 02, 2004

Alas, Michael Moore is an unguided missile

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His film should be compulsory viewing for politicians who order into the air that obscene weapon, the bomber

MICHAEL MOORE'S blockbuster, Fahrenheit 9/11, is the worst good film I have seen. Opening in Britain after breaking box-office records in America, it ranks among the most savage and sensational antiwar movies. Though I agree with its thrust, the depiction of George Bush over Iraq is flawed. Don't miss it, but turn off your brain first.

Then go quietly home and read a slim volume from two conservative historians, Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke. America Alone tells how a small group of neoconservatives contrived to take the greatest nation on Earth to war and kill thousands of people. Their anger is coldly controlled, and far more effective. How much better the Right does outrage than the Left.

Moore's thesis is simple. For more than a decade the Saudi aristocracy invested deeply in Bush family interests in Texas. They wanted to keep close to Washington out of self-protection, as they kept close to the Taleban. After 9/11 George W. Bush was appalled that his Saudi friends might be threatened by the catastrophe. He smuggled them out of the country, played down bin Laden's role and devoted all his efforts to blaming Saddam Hussein for 9/11.

These charges are visually spectacular rather than forensic. The Bushes are shown endlessly greeting Saudis, often in sinister slow motion. They bail out young George's business ventures. In return the CIA is ordered to prove the unprovable after 9/11. Soon two thirds of Americans hold Saddam responsible for the attack. Scares are exaggerated and exploited by the White House (as in Britain) to generate a war psychosis. America is terrorised into confrontation.

This film may be one-sided but then so was the war. It should be compulsory viewing for every politician who orders into the air that most obscene and cowardly weapon, the bomber. Targets are missed everywhere. Bits of babies splatter the screen, interspersed with Donald Rumsfeld boasting his "brilliant accuracy".

The public gets to see not just triumphalist footage of the Pentagon's Apocalypse Iraq, in theatre-shaking ferocity. It sees the human consequence on the ground, the numb bafflement of bereaved families and smashed neighbourhoods. I left the cinema with my contempt for the futility and cruelty of air power reinforced. I also left with a deep respect for many American soldiers, having to risk their lives in the backlash from the bombing yet not afraid to admit their shame at what America was asking them to do.

The trouble with Moore is that much of his targetry is no more accurate than Rumsfeld's. I do not believe Bush went to war to protect his family's Saudi oil interests. I am sure military mothers turn antiwar when their sons are killed. I am sure Halliburton profiteering and Bush cronyism were integral to the war. But neither invalidates it. The war had more to do with neocon support for Israel, of which Moore makes no mention, and with the nature of Saddam's regime, which he also ignores. Far more effective were the brave soldiers who protest on camera at fighting a "people who have never threatened America". Moral objection to a mistaken war is still a privilege of freedom.

So too is this film. It got made and distributed in an America still under arms. At this week's London opening, Moore wondered why no British Fahrenheit 9/11? The answer, I am afraid, is that British film-makers now depend on state subsidy. They stick to gangsters and upper-crust love stories.

Halper and Clarke's *America Alone* yields nothing in anger to Michael Moore. Both believe strongly in America's moral purpose and its right to self defence. They believe that this is better promoted by example than by conquest, by engaging the world through allies rather than "strapped to the back of a cruise missile". Their Iraq war is not about oil but about the agenda of a small group of Washington ideologues, whom they hold as traitors to the American conservative tradition.

This group's seizure of Washington (and London) after 9/11 makes a fascinating study in power. Known colloquially as the Vulcans, they embraced Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and the Pentagon architect of the Iraq occupation, Douglas Feith. Dick Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush were their front men. Their first commitment was to the defence of Israel. The neocons were prominent advisers to the right-wing Israeli Binyamin Netanyahu, and opposed all Middle East "peace processes". Having distrusted Nixon as soft on communism they distrusted Reagan as soft on Israel.

Halper and Clarke knew and worked with many neocons during the Cold War. Their response to them is partly cultural. The Vulcans represent tunnel-vision history. Opponents are "surrender monkeys . . . gloom-sayers, saboteurs, peacemongers". They are invariably anti-Semitic and "in league with Saddam Hussein". (Much the same was said in Downing Street and the salons of London's "Pentagon chic".)

With the coming to power of President Bush the neocons deftly substituted the threat of Islam for the threat of communism. On this basis they sought a "comprehensive revamping of American foreign policy". They disdained diplomacy, alliances and international law, which might "constrain and control American power", and demanded pre-emptive military assertion across the Arab world.

The neocons' initial enemies were not overseas. As is plain from Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack* the most hated foes were in-house, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State Department. The Iraq invasion would have been impossible had Rumsfeld and Feith not spectacularly torn up the post-invasion plans of the US Army and the State Department. This single act was as crucial to invasion success as it was to occupation failure. The US Army would never have gone to Iraq had Rumsfeld not promised "occupation-lite". Revisionists who now hold that the invasion was fine but the occupation botched are misguided. Invasion and occupation were linked indissolubly. They formed an ideological entity.

Halper and Clarke hardly mention oil, Saudi Arabia or conspiracy theories. They make their case by what is on the record. They show a Pentagon report on *Should Islam be the Religion of the New Iraqi State?*, which concluded "only as a last resort". Neocons did not care if they "fan the flames of Islamic fundamentalism". Since technology offered certain victory, war should become a first rather than last resort. Always war was good and allies bad. The authors conclude: "The neoconservative fascination with war would make an interesting psychological study."

The pendulum is shifting back. This week in the Supreme Court it was the conservative Sandra Day O'Connor who overruled the President with a warning that "we must preserve our commitment at home to the principles for which we fight abroad". The neocons, say Halper and Clarke, have "for the first time in three decades made the nature of one's patriotism an issue and domestic surveillance a growth industry". America overseas is suspected if not openly hated. "Friends, who love America and Americans, tell us that they barely recognise the country they thought they knew so well."

For all this, the conclusion is optimistic. To Halper and Clarke “the neocons have had their moment”. They have damaged American interests and values. They have made the American people less free, the world more prone to terror and even Israel less secure. Already the President is begging help in Iraq from Nato and the United Nations. He must swing back to the “centre-right”, to a global peace secured by strong alliances and a respect for law, principles “adopted by American administrations with great success since World War II”. I agree.

One mystery remains. By what act of self-delusion, by what lunacy, did a Labour government and a chunk of the British Establishment sign up to this clique, this aberration? What possessed them? That requires another film, another book.

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