

Michael Moore Rocks the Convention

By **Jonathan V. Last**
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Boston

AT LEAST **ROBERT BOROSAGE** is honest with his audience. A thousand people have packed the grand ballroom at the Royal Sonesta Hotel, and the event organizers tell me the line outside of those who couldn't get in stretches for nearly a mile. The crowd has gathered for a "Take Back America" rally put on by the **Campaign for America's Future**.

The rally promises appearances by Howard Dean and **Michael Moore**, so you can see why the audience would grow when Borosage, a co-director of the Campaign for America's Future, opens by saying, "We've all been told in our instructions not to do any Bush bashing." Not to worry: The doctor is in.

When we last left Howard Dean, he was a shell of his former self. Shellacked by both John Edwards and John Kerry in the Democratic primaries, the man who had spent 18 months scaring the bejesus out of establishment Democrats had become a national laughingstock, thanks to his Iowa meltdown.

For months, Dean abandoned the red-faced, vein-popping histrionics which had won him a modest national following and became kinder, gentler, and creepier. With a strange smile grafted onto his face, and his eyebrows arched in perpetual fake amusement, he went from resembling Randy Savage to looking like the Joker. Maybe it was exhaustion or depression or just bad advice, but whatever the case, Dean wasn't himself.

Today, the good Dean is back; establishment Democrats should start worrying again.

Dean 3.1 has a new message: Getting progressives to run for office. His idea is that if progressives start running for school boards and town councils and dogcatcher, then eventually Democrats will have an organization that rivals Republicans. Dean himself is now actively involved in this crusade, announcing that he's been trying to help one progressive get elected to her library council. "I think the library is pretty important," he says, especially since we have "an administration where they like book burning better than reading books!"

YEAAARRRGHHA!

He returns to some of his old themes, attacking Fox News, claiming that America is "less safe" after capturing Saddam Hussein, and insisting that progressives need to contest the South, since eventually Southerners will stop voting on "guns, God, and gays."

But Dean stays away from specifics. "I'm not going to stand by making speeches about policies," he explains. "Because right now, for the next three and a half months, we've got to talk about politics." And not just Kerry-Edwards politics, mind you. Progressives need to "put our hearts and soul not just into the Kerry-Edwards campaign." John Kerry, he notes, "is only part of the solution."

You'll be unsurprised to learn that Howard Dean has the rest of the solution, which involves progressives--his people--entering races for elective office at all levels.

Dean claims that getting his army into office will eventually hurt Republicans, but before they can do that, of course, they'll have to wrest control of the Democratic party from more centrist, establishment politicians like--well, just to pick a name--John Kerry.

Having failed to take over the Democratic party with a frontal assault, Howard Dean is now trying a Trojan horse.

LIKE A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN, Michael Moore never arrives on time. On Monday, Moore kept a gaggle of **Veterans for Peace** waiting at the North End for nearly an hour. Today, when it's his turn to speak following Howard Dean at Take Back America, he's nowhere to be seen. Roger Hickey, another co-director of the Campaign for America's Freedom, comes to the stage to stall. He calms the crowd by announcing that "Michael Moore is on his way!" but then begins shuffling the day's program, moving up later speakers to fill the gap.

Instead of Moore, we get speeches from John Wilson of the **National Education Association**, Carl Pope of the **Sierra Club**, and **Robert Reich**, the former secretary of Labor. In between speakers we're given little updates on Moore's whereabouts.

Almost an hour and half later, Hickey announces that "Michael Moore is in the house!" A cheer goes up. Hickey then gives Moore a long and generous introduction, which is followed by a great roar from the crowd. The ovation lasts a minute, then two minutes, and then begins to subside, with no sign of Moore. "Keep it going!" Hickey implores. Sensing that they may have committed a faux pas, the crowd redoubles its effort and continues clapping, adding a chant of "Mi-chael! Mi-chael!" The chant speeds up and then dissipates, while the applause lingers and people in the audience begin looking at one another uncomfortably. After a few minutes, the cheering dwindles, before ceasing altogether.

And poor Roger Hickey gets desperate. He starts plugging left-wing media outlets to fill the space. He tells the crowd to go see *Outfoxed*. They cheer. He tells the crowd to listen to Air America. They cheer. He tells them to read the *American Prospect*. They cheer.

"*Salon!*" someone shouts.

"And *Salon*, too," Hickey booms into the microphone.

"*Buzzflash!*" another person yells.

"And *Buzzflash*," Hickey responds.

"The *Nation!*" cries Katrina vanden Heuvel, from the back of the room. "The *Nation!*"

Hickey ignores her.

WHEN MICHAEL MOORE finally does arrive, his audience isn't bothered; they're primed. The eruption of affection is staggering. And Moore does not disappoint.

It says here that Michael Moore is a heck of a speaker. Dishonest? Sure. Intellectually rickety? You betcha. But put aside the facts and the politics and the morality: Taken as a performance piece, Moore's speech is sparkling entertainment. He's warm and self-deprecating. Funny and conversational. He does voices and impersonations. He changes meter and cadences. He is, without doubt, the real thing.

If you feel compelled to dwell on facts and morality and whatnot, yes, Moore does call General Electric "war profiteers" and say that Matt Lauer--Matt Lauer?--is a shill for the Bush administration. Yes, he does call conservatives "hate-triots." Yes, he does say that Republicans wake up every day "at 6:00 in the morning" so they can "figure out which minority group they're going to screw today." Yes, he does say Canadians "are just like us--only better."

But to dwell on such trivialities is to miss Michael Moore's higher truth. He is no longer just a crank or a provocateur. He has become a liberal saint.

Moore was beatified around the time of the Oscars in 2003, when he went from being a liberal-issue activist to an explicitly anti-Bush rallying point. But his canonization didn't come until a few weeks ago when *Fahrenheit 9/11* grossed \$22 million in its opening weekend. Since then, *Fahrenheit 9/11* has taken on the mystical quality of a holy text. Moore and others at Take Back America refer to it simply as "The Film." Believers identify each other by asking, "Have you seen The Film?" Moore asks everyone in the audience to take two family members to see The Film before Election Day, so that the heathens might be converted.

The theological significance of The Film doesn't have anything to do with its content--there's nothing there that hasn't been floating around *Democrats.com* for four years--but rather lies in its box-office performance. You see, the success of The Film lets the people on the left pretend that everyone in America agrees with them.

"THE MAJORITY of our fellow Americans are liberal and progressive," Moore says. He shunts aside as myth the notion that the country is divided evenly on politics. "This ain't a 50-50 country," he says.

Instead, Moore claims that the 50-50 split we hear so much about is only among likely voters. You see, only 50 percent of eligible voters vote, and the non-voting 50 percent is overwhelmingly anti-Bush and sure to come to the polls this November because "You can't compare this election to any election before September 11, 2001."

So Moore thinks John Kerry is *en route* to a 75-25 drubbing of George W. Bush. Which would be pretty impressive, considering that FDR only beat Herbert Hoover 59-41.

Moore is, however, covering his bases. As he sees it, the only way Kerry can lose is if he fails "to push forward the liberal progressive agenda that America already agrees with."

THE PROBLEM, of course, is that Howard Dean was a saint, too. His success at raising millions of dollars on the internet and organizing thousands of MeetUp parties led his followers to believe that everyone agreed with them.

You'll recall that John Kerry and John Edwards--two perfectly ordinary politicians--beat Howard Dean like a drum.

So how is it that Kerry is supposed to win the White House with a message that couldn't carry the Democratic primary in Wisconsin? Who cares.

The real question is: Why has Michael Moore been embraced by the Democratic establishment? Nearly all of Democratic Washington came to the D.C. premiere of *Fahrenheit 9/11* earlier this month. The last two Democratic presidents have given him their seal of approval: When Bill Clinton

was asked what he thought of The Film, he replied, "I think every American ought to see it." After his convention speech last night, Jimmy Carter **sat with** Moore.

Surely they must realize that Moore has sold about as many books as Ann Coulter. Surely they must realize that The Film--which is an unheard of success as a documentary--has only sold in the neighborhood 14 million tickets, a great many of which were no doubt to repeat customers. After all, it's one thing for the kids at "Take Back America" to think that Moore's conspiracy theories are a cultural given because everyone *they* know has seen The Film. But shouldn't the last two Democratic presidents know better?

Like Dean, Michael Moore is a bubble, waiting to burst.