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Dude, Where's My Intellectual Honesty?

By [Bryan Keefer](#)
October 16, 2003

In his latest book *Dude, Where's My Country?* -- a polemic against President Bush -- liberal gadfly Michael Moore again demonstrates why he has a reputation as a slipshod journalist who has trouble getting his facts right.

Moore established his reputation for playing fast and loose with the truth in his first film, the 1989 documentary "Roger and Me," centering on General Motors layoffs in his hometown of Flint, Michigan. As the New Yorker's Pauline Kael wrote at the time, he manipulated the chronology of his film, implying that certain events were a response to GM's large 1986 layoffs when in fact they had occurred years before.

Moore's best-selling book *Stupid White Men* was no less [factually challenged](#). In it, he made a number of mistakes, ranging from the sloppy (suggesting that the multiyear cost of a new fighter plane was all being spent in 2001) to the outright ridiculous ([reprinting](#) an outdated list of attacks on Bush from the Internet virtually unedited). "Bowling for Columbine," for which Moore was awarded last year's Academy Award for best documentary feature, continued the pattern. Critics, including my co-editor [Ben Fritz](#) and Dan Lyons of Forbes, documented how Moore repeated a well-debunked myth about supposed US aid to the Taliban, [falsely portrayed](#) a scene in a Michigan bank to make it appear as though one could open an account and walk out with a gun, and [altered](#) a Bush-Quayle '88 campaign ad, among numerous other distortions.

Moore has generally brushed aside such criticism with suggestions such as "How can there be inaccuracy in comedy?" as he [put it](#) to Lou Dobbs on CNN's "Moneyline." More recently, however, he has gone on the offensive, going so far as to suggest critics of "Bowling for Columbine" are

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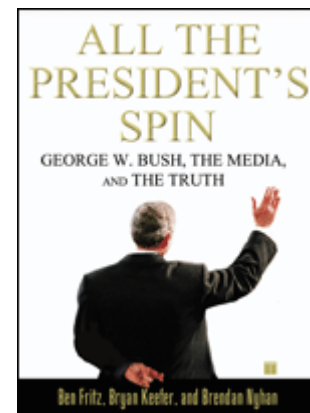
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[Upcoming appearances](#)

-Sept. 22, 5:15 PM EST: Bryan Keefer 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

"committing an act of libel" in an August 19 appearance on MSNBC. And in a [long article](#) posted on his web site, he denounces criticism of the film as "character assassination" and "make-believe stories."

Despite repeatedly dismissing his critics, Moore has recently acknowledged some of his errors. For instance, in the DVD release of "Bowling for Columbine," he [changed](#) the caption he inserted over a Bush/Quayle '88 campaign ad, making the text more accurate (although the viewer still is unlikely to realize that the text wasn't in the original ad in the first place). On his web site, Moore explicitly [admitted](#) making this correction in the film.

In two places in *Dude, Where's My Country?*, Moore implicitly acknowledges mistakes in his earlier works. On several [occasions](#) over the past two years, Moore has asserted that (as he put it on "[Politically Incorrect](#)") "the Bush Administration gave \$43 million in aid to the Taliban in part to -- give money to the poppy growers for the money they would lose because they can't grow heroin anymore." "Bowling for Columbine" continued the canard, asserting that the US gave \$245 million in aid to the Taliban government of Afghanistan. Both of these are false; the aid, intended to help relieve famine, was given to non-governmental organizations, not the Taliban. In his latest book, Moore finally gets it right, noting that the aid "was to be distributed by international organizations." (page 34)

Moore also implicitly corrects himself about what was manufactured at a Lockheed plant in Littleton, Colorado. In "Bowling for Columbine," Moore [implies](#) that the plant made nuclear weapons at or immediately before the time he visited. Actually, while the plant was involved in nuclear missile production years before, it now makes rockets that are used as space-launch vehicles for military and civilian satellites. In his newest book, Moore sets the record straight, writing that "Lockheed Martin, the biggest arms maker in the world, built rockets that carried into space the special new satellites that guided the missiles fired into Baghdad" during the recent war in Iraq. (page 74)

At least Moore is finally telling the truth about the US aid and Lockheed. Most other subjects come in for much more dubious treatment in the book. For example, Moore misstates the details of how members of the Bin Laden family left the US after Sept. 11, claiming that "while thousands were stranded and could not fly, if you could

"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.

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-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."

prove you were a close relative of the biggest mass murderer in U.S. history, you got a free trip to gay Paree!" (page 20) Yet a few pages earlier, Moore himself quotes a November, 2001 New Yorker article by Jane Mayer which notes that "Once the FAA permitted overseas flights [after Sept. 11], the jet [with the Bin Ladens] flew to Europe." (page 4) As this and [other reports](#) have made clear, the Bin Ladens did not leave the US until *after* the resumption of commercial flights. And a Boston Globe article of September 20, 2001 quotes a Saudi government official stating that the Bin Ladens chartered their own plane - hardly a "free" trip as Moore suggests.

Moore's penchant for conspiracy theories often leads him to stretch the facts or make laughable claims. Bashing the proposed Terrorist Information Awareness project, he writes that "There is usually very little in the way of an electronic or paper trail when it comes to terrorists. They lay low and pay cash. You and me, we leave trails everywhere - credit cards, cell phones, medical records, online; everything we do. Who is *really* being watched here?" (page 110, his italics) In Moore's fervor to indict the TIA system, he forgets about the [credit cards](#) used by the 9-11 hijackers, which were used to help retrace their steps.

Moore also repeats a well-debunked myth about Democratic presidential hopeful General Wesley Clark. According to Moore, "Clark has said that he received phone calls on Sept. 11 and in the weeks after from people at 'think tanks' and from people within the White House telling him to use his position as a pundit for CNN to 'connect' Sept. 11 to Saddam Hussein." (page 53) Moore cites a June 15, 2003 [interview](#) with Clark on NBC's "Meet the Press." Despite somewhat ambiguous phrasing in that interview, however, Clark, has subsequently been consistent in his [claim](#) that it was a member of a think tank who contacted him, not the White House, a fact buttressed by a recent [report](#) that identified the man who made the call. And Moore pluralizes the single call Clark refers to in the "Meet the Press" interview to "calls" - a claim Clark has never made.

In addition, Moore attacks the Patriot Act with an array of examples that have nothing to do with it. He introduces the list by writing that "To date, there are at least thirty-four documented cases of FBI abuse under the Patriot Act - and at least another 966 individuals have filed formal complaints. Many of these people were just minding their own business, or seeking to partake in our free society. Consider these examples." (page 111) Moore lists an

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anti-globalization activist who was questioned by "immigration officials" and a "State department agent"; a New York judge who asked a defendant if she was a terrorist; French journalists detained at the Los Angeles Airport; a local police officer in Vermont entering a teacher's classroom to photograph an anti-Bush art display; a college student questioned by Secret Service agents about "anti-American" material; and a Green Party activist questioned on his way to Prague. None of the incidents he lists, however, happened as a result of the Patriot Act, nor did any of them involve the FBI (the French journalists were detained for improper travel documents, and the Green Party activist was questioned by the Secret Service, as Moore's own sources note).



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Bush's policies towards Iraq come in for particular criticism - and, in several cases, gross distortions. Moore writes that "There were claims that the French were only opposing war to get economic benefits out of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In fact, it was the Americans who were making a killing. In 2001, the U.S. was Iraq's leading trading partner, consuming more than 40 percent of Iraq's oil exports. That's \$6 billion in trade with the Iraqi dictator." (page 69) In reality, that "trade" was done under the auspices of the United Nations oil-for-food program, which allowed Iraq to sell a limited amount of oil to purchase humanitarian supplies. (For details on the program, see [this report to Congress](#).) One can only imagine what Moore would have said if the U.S. refused to purchase Iraqi oil and allowed its citizens to starve.

At another point, Moore attacks Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement to the United Nations that "What we are giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence." According to Moore, "Just days earlier, Powell apparently was not so sure. During a gathering of CIA officials reviewing the evidence against Saddam Hussein, Powell tossed the papers in the air and declared: 'I'm not reading this. This is bullshit.'" (page 82) Moore makes it appear as though the speech Powell gave at the UN included the evidence he had called "bullshit." In fact, the US News & World Report article that Moore cites does note Powell's exclamation, but it details the process by which Powell winnowed out pieces of evidence he was uncomfortable presenting. The article concludes "And plenty was cut [from Powell's speech]. Sometimes it was because information wasn't credible, sometimes because Powell didn't want his speech to get too long, sometimes because [CIA Director George] Tenet insisted on protecting

sources and methods."

Nor is Moore above twisting facts to attack the Bush administration's tax cuts. Moore criticizes the 2003 Bush tax cut for reducing revenue to the states. As one example, he writes, "Take the kids in Oregon, whose schools were shut down early this year because they ran out of tax money." (page 160) While Moore makes it appear as though the 2003 Bush tax cut shut down Oregon's schools, Oregon actually passed a law in May 2003 [decoupling](#) its state income tax system from the federal government's, insuring that the 2003 tax cut would have no impact on the state's budget. Moreover, as an article from the June 8 New York Times Magazine - one of Moore's own sources - notes, Oregon voters had rejected a referendum earlier in the year that would have raised taxes to pay for schools and other spending.

In a recent [interview](#) with Bookreporter.com, Moore was asked if he made a special effort to fact-check his new book. "All my work goes through a thorough fact-checking process," he said. "I hire three teams of people to go through the book and then two separate lawyers vet it. There is a reason that I have never been sued over anything in my three books -- that's because everything in them is true." Apparently, Moore needs to hire himself some new fact-checkers. Regardless of the supposed rigors of its vetting process, *Dude, Where's My Country?* cements Moore's reputation as one of our nation's sloppiest commentators.

[Note to readers: Be sure and check out the [companion piece](#) to this article, listing all the errors we found in *Dude, Where's My Country?*.]

Research assistance by Davis Bell and David Mishook.

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