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## Viewer beware

In "Bowling for Columbine," Michael Moore once again puts distortions and contradictions before the truth

By Ben Fritz ([ben@spinsanity.org](mailto:ben@spinsanity.org))

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Michael Moore insists he wants to be taken seriously. The author and filmmaker, an unabashed champion for liberal causes, is challenging America's gun culture with his latest endeavor, the documentary "Bowling for Columbine." Like his first film, "Roger and Me," it consists of a mix of satirical interviews with average people, confrontational interviews with celebrities and Moore's thoughts on what is going wrong with America. The argument often takes a back seat to the humor, but that's just Moore's style, as he explained to the Contra Costa Times in March: "I always assume that only 10 to 20 percent of people who read my books or see my films will take the facts and hard-core analysis and do something with it. If I can bring the other 80 percent to it through entertainment and comedy, then some of it will trickle through."

The problem is, once you delve beneath the humor, it turns out his "facts and hard-core analysis" are frequently inaccurate, contradictory and confused. At one point in the film, Moore apparently even alters a Bush-Quayle campaign ad, changing history to make a point. Like many of the political celebrities increasingly filling our TV screens and bookstores, he is entertaining, explicitly partisan, and all too willing to twist facts to promote himself and his vision of the truth.

Moore's problems with veracity date back to "Roger and Me," in which he famously shifted the actual timeline of events for dramatic effect. While garnering some criticism, most notably from the New Yorker's Pauline Kael, the distortions didn't get too many people riled up; indeed, the movie made him a celebrity. This year, with the double-whammy of his best-selling book *Stupid White Men* and the box office success of "Bowling for Columbine," one

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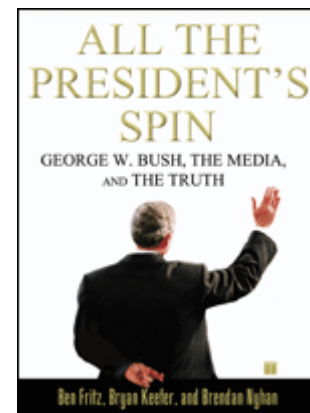
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-Sept. 22, 5:15 PM EST: Bryan Keeler will appear on MSNBC's "Lester Holt Live."  
 -Sept. 23, 1-2 PM CST: Ben Fritz will appear on WILL Urbana, Ill.'s "Afternoon Magazine."  
 -Sept. 28, 7 PM PST: Ben Fritz will appear on KXLU's

of the most financially successful documentaries ever, Moore has become the American left's most prominent media figure.

They could use a better spokesman.

As I [showed in April](#), *Stupid White Men* is riddled with inaccuracies and ad hominem attacks. In it, Moore claims that five-sixths of the 2001 defense budget went towards a single plane and that two-thirds of President Bush's campaign funds came from just over seven hundred people. Both facts are obviously untrue to anyone remotely familiar with the defense budget or campaign finance law and are disproved by the very sources Moore cites. He accuses former President Clinton of having "kick[ed] ten million people off of welfare," assuming that every person who left the rolls during the '90s boom was brutally left to fend for herself, rather than leaving for a job. The book is riddled with similarly absurd arguments, most notably that the recession is a creation of the wealthy who "are wallowing in the loot they've accumulated in the past two decades, and now they want to make sure you don't come a-lookin' for your piece of the pie."

"Bowling for Columbine" is more of the same. Although, like *Stupid White Men*, it's full of hilarious moments, Moore can't seem to keep his facts or his arguments straight.

Counterintuitively for a liberal, he wants to argue that gun control is not a significant factor in America's high rate of gun deaths compared to other countries, and to do so, he travels to Canada, which he claims is similar to the U.S. in every way except its attitude towards self-reliance. He dismisses typical liberal concerns about poverty creating crime, noting that, "Liberals contend [gun violence is a result of] all the poverty we have here. But the unemployment rate in Canada is twice what we have here." By every measure of international comparison, though, Canada's poverty rate is significantly lower than that of the U.S., thanks to the generous social insurance programs that he repeatedly praises in the film.

Much more mendaciously, Moore has apparently altered footage of an ad run by the Bush/Quayle campaign in 1988 to implicate Bush in the Willie Horton scandal. Making a point about the use of racial symbols to scare the American public, he shows the Bush/Quayle ad called "Revolving Doors," which attacked Michael Dukakis for a Massachusetts prison furlough program by showing

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-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."

prisoners entering and exiting a prison (the original ad can be seen [here](#) [Real Player video]). Superimposed over the footage of the prisoners is the text "Willie Horton released. Then kills again." This caption is displayed as if it is part of the original ad. However, existing footage, media reports and the recollections of several high-level people involved in the campaign indicate that the "Revolving Doors" ad did not explicitly mention Horton, unlike the notorious ad run by the National Security Political Action Committee (which had close ties to Bush media advisor Roger Ailes). In addition, the caption is incorrect -- Horton did not kill anyone while on prison furlough (he raped a woman).

Although he uses statistics much less frequently in "Bowling for Columbine" than in *Stupid White Men*, Moore still manages to present at least one figure inaccurately. During a stylized overview of US foreign policy, he claims that the U.S. gave \$245 million in aid to the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan in 2000 and 2001. The Taliban aid tale is a favorite of Moore's that he has [repeated](#) in numerous media appearances over the past year. Contrary to his claim, the aid did not go to the Taliban -- it actually consisted of food and food security programs administered by the United Nations and non-governmental organizations to relieve an impending famine.

Beyond the satire and the fabrications, just what is Moore's argument? It's often hard to tell. At times, while dismissing the influence of pop culture, he blames the government's militarism, suggesting that it's somehow relevant that the day of the Columbine High School shootings was also the day of one of the heaviest U.S.-led NATO bombings in Yugoslavia. (Moore is an ardent opponent of U.S. military intervention - soon after the war on terrorism began, he [called](#) the President and Vice President "Bin Bush" and "Bin Cheney" and said on the radio program "[Democracy Now](#)" [Real Player audio], "We're the national sniper when it comes to going after countries like Iraq.") Even setting aside this questionable chain of causality, Moore contradicts his own thesis that foreign bombing leads to domestic gun violence when he approvingly notes that the United Kingdom, which played a leading role in bombing Yugoslavia with the U.S., had only 68 gun homicides the same year America had 11,127.

Contradicting himself doesn't seem to be a problem for Moore, though. In the movie and subsequent media appearances, he has derided America's lack of a social safety net, comparing us unfavorably to Canada, even

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though he states explicitly in the film that the two countries don't differ significantly in terms of poverty.

Moore also claims several times that our higher gun homicide rate must be the result of American culture rather than the greater number of guns in our country, citing the fact that Canada has a much lower gun homicide rate despite having seven million guns in its ten million homes (Moore ignores the fact that Canada has significantly fewer handguns and a much stricter gun licensing system). Yet that doesn't stop him from repeatedly bashing the anti-gun control NRA and even making a visit to the home of its president, Charlton Heston, the climax of the movie. In [an e-mail](#) to supporters, Moore even referred to Heston as a "gun supremacist." And in [an interview](#) on Phil Donahue's MSNBC show recently, Moore said he supports banning all handguns just minutes before stating, "I don't think, ultimately, getting rid of the guns will be the answer."

Repeatedly, though, he returns to the issue of fear in the movie, claiming that excessive coverage of gun violence by the media makes Americans scared of each other and therefore more violent. This circular argument doesn't make any sense either. On the one hand, Moore has made an entire film purporting to investigate why the U.S. has the highest rate of gun violence in the developed world. He then attempts to answer the question by theorizing that the media provides too much coverage of gun violence, causing citizens to fear each other. If gun violence is really so bad, though, shouldn't the media be covering it and don't citizens have something to be afraid of? And if the media is indeed over-covering the issue and America is safer than we think, why did Moore make this film?

Ironically, Moore interviews and cites the work of USC Professor Barry Glassner, whose book *The Culture of Fear* attacks the media for sensationalizing incidents of bad news while ignoring the bigger picture. One of the book's primary examples is extensive media coverage of school shootings that ignores the overall downward trend in youth violence in recent years. Indeed, Glassner points out that people are three times more likely to be struck dead by lightning than die in a school shooting. Moore, however, focuses extensively in the film on the Columbine massacre and a school shooting in his hometown of Flint, Michigan, and doesn't seem all that concerned with the country's epidemic of lightning strikes.

Here, as ever, Michael Moore just doesn't seem to know



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what he thinks. When pressed, in fact, he isn't even sure he actually has a point. Appearing on CNN's [Moneyline](#) last spring, host Lou Dobbs asked him about the inaccuracies in *Stupid White Men*. "How can there be inaccuracy in comedy?" Moore responded.

Satire is not an excuse for dissembling. Great satirists like Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain used hyperbole as a form of social criticism. Michael Moore, however, uses lies, distortions, and nonsensical arguments to mask cheap attacks and promote his own political agenda. Take him seriously at your own risk.

**Clarification - 11/20 9:34 AM EST:** The figure on homicides in the United Kingdom should have read that that country had 68 gun homicides the same year the U.S. had 11,127, not total homicides.

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