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Michael Moore can make you cry.

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Michael Moore is a comedian and a populist, and he is well suited to both missions. What sort of comedian would he be, after all, without the Big Mac belly, without the famous duck waddle? A clever one, perhaps, a witty one who keeps his cool, but not an icon. Not Michael Moore. His bulk is essential, as he knows—he's always referring to it. "You don't want this rolling around in the White House," he says, opening his arms and exposing his stomach, when someone suggests—as people frequently do—that he run for president. Al Franken and Jon Stewart say funny things, but Moore *is* funny, in quite a different way. Michael Moore, the fat man, is the big guy in his baseball cap, the way Charlie Chaplin was the little tramp in his bowler (although in Chaplin's day the plutocrat was fat and the poor man was tiny). Likewise, what sort of populist would Moore be without the sloppy clothes? He understands his costume is crucial. He wore a tuxedo to receive an Emmy for his show "TV Nation," but he kept on his baseball cap.

Comedy and populism combine in Moore to produce a political force of especial potency, ridicule knocking down what anger leaves upright. They work together beautifully because they follow the same laws. The populist champions the man who works with his hands, with real stuff, against the one who works with his head. Populists are not revolutionaries—even left-wing ones are conservative, in the literal sense of the word. Revolution is an abstraction, an intellectual idea; populists want to return to roots, to basic values, to solid things—to the way things were before intellectuals and financiers corrupted them. Comedy, too, is on the side of the body and against the soul. It mocks hubris, affectation, and hypocrisy, but it also mocks originality, utopianism, and earnestness. It takes the point of view that, in the end, we are just bodies, eating, defecating, and copulating, and everything else is pretentious rubbish.

Moore has been a hero to comedians for fifteen years, ever since "Roger & Me"—his brilliant comic documentary about the decline of Flint, Michigan, the auto town where he grew up—came out, in 1989. Who could forget the bunny lady, fallen on hard times and selling rabbits for "pets or meat"? Or all the dumb, cheerful people—Miss Michigan; Anita Bryant—saying dumb, cheerful things in the face of Flint's disaster? Most affecting of all was Moore himself, shot often from the back, shuffling, feet splayed, to knock on doors, or from the side, trying not to laugh when somebody said something amazing, and talking through the film with his Michigan accent and his voice too affectionate to be sarcastic, too forceful to be merely funny. But in the past three years Moore has become a political hero as well. People revere him. After he gave a speech at last year's Oscars denouncing President Bush and the Iraq war, he received many letters from soldiers thanking him for opening their eyes to the lies of the government and for confirming their view that they are fighting for a country where dissent is embraced. "Mr. Moore, you are America," one

wrote. One fan said that she had a spare ticket to a recent sold-out Moore talk in California, which she could have hawked for a fortune, but she didn't, because making a profit from a Michael Moore event just wouldn't be right. "Michael's not only funny—he can make you cry," Danny Goldberg, the chairman of Artemis Records and a friend of Moore's, says. "He's very cognizant of the broadest possible audience, and emotion is vital if you're going to have a politics that speaks to most people. Al Franken's so clever, and Jon Stewart's so good at what he does, but Michael has an ability to touch people's hearts that neither of them has. He's like a great blues singer."

Moore is of the left, but it is also important to him that he is mainstream. He wants to change things, and he knows that to do so he must prove to his followers that they are the majority. He always emphasizes that most Americans agree with him on matters like gay rights, abortion rights, the environment, and the war in Iraq, whether or not they call themselves liberals. He tells people to vote. He tells them to take over their local Democratic party—so few people go to the meetings, he says, that if you show up with fifteen friends you can institute a Green agenda without much opposition. He asks people to spend a weekend next October in one of the congressional districts where the race promises to be close, handing out flyers. Last month, he endorsed Wesley Clark, ignoring howls of protest from pacifist fans, and despite having compared the bombing of Kosovo, which Clark commanded, to the shootings at Columbine High School, in Colorado. It was a pragmatic decision—a reaction, perhaps, to the consequences of his support for Ralph Nader in 2000. "We'll get more people with that attitude than the attitude of 'Oh, Clark voted for Reagan,'" Moore says, sitting in his office in midtown Manhattan. "Aarrgggh! It's like, yeah? What's your point? So did the majority of Americans. What are you saying to them—'Don't come in our tent'?"

His influence is extraordinary. His third book, "Stupid White Men" (2001), a diatribe against rich people, white people, dumb people, men, Israel, and North Korea, among other things, was on the *Times* best-seller list for fifty-nine weeks and sold more than four million copies worldwide. "Dude, Where's My Country?" (2003), his fourth book, a diatribe against rich people, white people, and the Iraq war, among other things, started out at No. 1. His first book, "Downsize This!" (1996), was also a best-seller. He is even more popular in Europe than he is here. Recently, "Dude, Where's My Country?" was No. 1 on the German best-seller list, at the same time that "Stupid White Men" was No. 2 and "Downsize This!" was No. 6. Moore's TV shows of the mid- and late nineties, "TV Nation" and "The Awful Truth," went off the air after a couple of seasons, and "Canadian Bacon," his second movie and only attempt at fiction, was not a success; but "Bowling for Columbine" (2002), his fourth film, earned more than twenty-one million dollars at the box office in the U.S. (tripling the previous record for a documentary) and won the Best Feature Documentary Academy Award.

Everywhere Moore went on a recent fifty-eight-city book tour through America and Europe, thousands of people showed up to see him. Nine thousand in London. Eight thousand in both Berkeley and Denver. Six thousand in Ypsilanti. Four thousand in Berlin. Ten thousand in Portland, Oregon. Sometimes thousands would show up without tickets and simply stand outside. He entered and left the stage to standing ovations.

On a sunny Wednesday in November, the fourth day of his European book tour, Moore did a lunchtime show in Liverpool, at the Everyman and Playhouse. He loped onto the stage and waved.

He opened with a few jokes about the Prince Charles sex scandal that had broken the week before. The audience laughed raucously. "I've always asked everyone to send me to Liverpool and they've always said no," he said. "Why? They're afraid of the city, aren't they? Because at the end of this book reading you might actually go out on the street and tear something down. Woo-hoo!" He told them that Americans of Irish origin had a special feeling for Liverpool, because their ancestors—Moore's own great-grandmother among them—had come through the city on their way to America.

"We never left, Mike," a man in the balcony called out. "We starved here."

"You're just bringing up old history," Moore ribbed.

But the man in the balcony didn't want to joke about it. "Five thousand Irish people were buried in paupers' graves in this city through typhus," he called down. "This city has seen misery untold."

"Well, I wasn't trying to sugarcoat history. I was just happy that my great-grandmother was able to find a place. Don't be upset at her for leaving you guys behind." The audience laughed. Although Moore is primarily a filmmaker and writer, used to controlling his environment, he is an extremely talented live performer, exquisitely sensitive to his audience's mood and response. The harshness of his comedy, the proportion of comedy to political anger, the flattery or mockery of the audience, the number and type of swearwords he uses—all are adjusted second by second while he's onstage.

"Go back to talking about America," a man in the stalls called out. "You're on safe ground there."

"Who's the beneficiary of this war?" Moore asked the audience a few minutes later. "Halliburton. . . . Has anyone else benefitted?"

"Israel!" several voices in the crowd cried out.

"It's all part of the same ball of wax, right?" Moore said. "The oil companies, Israel, Halliburton. I would just like to make a modest proposal: from now on, for every Brit or American kid that's killed in this war, I would like Halliburton to slay one mid-level executive." The audience applauded wildly. Before they'd stopped laughing, Moore seized the moment.

"I'd like to take a couple minutes here to read the names of the fifty-three dead Brits," he said. "Stephen Allbutt, dead. Luke Allsopp, dead. Russell Aston, dead." He continued on down the list until the end. "I'd like to pause for a moment to honor them and offer our apologies to them and to their families for their senseless death.

"Now that people know they've been lied to, what's happened? Bush's approval ratings have gone from eighty per cent to forty-eight per cent in just a few months. My new book has been No. 1 since the day it came out. Let me just read you one line from the new book so you understand what's No. 1 in America: 'These bastards who run our country are a bunch of conniving, thieving, smug pricks who need to be brought down and removed and replaced with a whole new system that we control!'" The audience clapped again, and Moore called for questions.

"Us working-class people are being taught in schools to accept a middle-class perspective," an old man in the balcony said. "We're brainwashed. Thank God we've got working-class people like you, if you are working class."

“Shut up,” said a bored voice from the crowd.

“You’re a working-class traitor!” the old man shouted back angrily, and other people joined in shouting abuse to one man or the other. The audience was rowdy and as interested in itself as it was in the performance. Moore watched the shouting for a moment.

“I come from a working-class family,” he said when the noise died down. “My dad was an autoworker, my mom was a clerk. Until I was thirty-five, I never made more than fifteen thousand dollars a year. I still believe the lessons I learned when I was raised in a Roman Catholic household. Like, it’s harder for a rich man to get into Heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”

Moore’s relatives emigrated from Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century to work on the railroad or as farmers or in the factories in Pontiac and Flint. His father’s parents both worked at General Motors; his mother’s father was a country doctor near Flint. Moore is the oldest of three children: his sister Anne is a lawyer; his sister Veronica teaches early-childhood education. As a child in the sixties (he was born in 1954), he was sent to Catholic school, where he was a good, obedient student. After eighth grade, he enrolled in a seminary: he admired the Berrigan brothers and thought that the priesthood was the way to effect social change. This resolve lasted only through his first year, though, after the Detroit Tigers made it to the World Series for the first time in Moore’s life and the seminary wouldn’t allow him to watch the games. He discovered girls in band practice (the seminary wasn’t big enough to have a band of its own), and by tenth grade he had reentered the secular world.

In high school, he joined the debate team. He gained an Eagle Scout award for putting together a slide show about the worst polluters in his town. He wrote a school play in which Christ came down from the Cross but was nailed up again by a group of characters who were obviously modelled on certain local people. When he was seventeen, he saw “A Clockwork Orange,” and it is still his favorite film; Stanley Kubrick is his favorite filmmaker. His senior year, he was voted class clown, and soon after he turned eighteen he got elected to the school board; his platform was “Fire the principal,” and, a few months later, the principal was forced to resign. He attended the local campus of the University of Michigan for a year; he claims that he quit one morning because he couldn’t find a parking space. He signed up to work on the assembly line like his father, but he called in sick the first day and never went back.

After he dropped out of college, Moore became a notorious figure in Flint. He was a hippie in those days, with long hair that he wore loose. He wore banged-up jeans and, later, big bifocals. He had a weekly radio show that aired on Sunday mornings called “Radio Free Flint.” He ran a film series. He was always turning up on the evening news, leading a rally or an anti-nuclear protest or talking into the camera, criticizing the police. He started a crisis center for teen-agers, and that somehow mutated into a small alternative newspaper called the *Flint Voice*. He hadn’t had any money to start a paper, but he persuaded the folksinger Harry Chapin to give a series of benefit concerts for it. It got a little advertising, too—the local vegetarian restaurant, the head shop. Moore would hold editorial meetings in people’s houses, and he made a point of always inviting one contributor, Ben Hamper, who worked on the assembly line at General Motors. Hamper found the meetings dull. He wasn’t allowed to smoke indoors. There was wine rather than beer or liquor (Moore rarely drinks), and bad hippie music (Moore loved Jackson Browne and Joan Baez).

They'd take place on a street full of neatly mowed lawns, and Hamper felt that if the person with the house really wanted to be radical he could begin with the lawn. "It was very dainty," Hamper says.

After a while, the *Voice* became known on the left, particularly among editors of similar papers in other cities. Moore himself held many of those other papers in contempt, feeling that they had abandoned their alternative roots in favor of silly, yuppie articles rating tanning salons and ice cream. In 1980, the *Voice* ran a story about a motel that refused to hire black people or give them rooms after eight o'clock at night. Another article revealed that the mayor was using federally paid workers to go door to door campaigning for him. When the mayor heard about the story, he obtained a warrant and ordered the Flint police to seize the printing plates right off the press; Moore went to court and got the seizure reversed, and the incident became national news. The paper also ran articles about the wider world; Moore was interested in the usual lefty international issues of the time. He was involved in the anti-apartheid campaign at the University of Michigan. He travelled to Nicaragua in 1983 to check out the Sandinistas, and to Israel in 1988 to witness the first intifada. There was also comic relief. Each year during deer-hunting season, around a million hunters tromped into the Michigan woods, many of them drunk, and each year about ten people died; Moore ran a clip-and-save ad in the paper that placed a photo of a man, titled "Man," next to a photo of a deer, titled "Deer," and asked that readers study the two carefully before setting out.

In 1982, Moore started seeing Kathleen Glynn, whom he later married. She was Irish Catholic, too; she had curly red hair, freckles, and a pointy chin. She had married when she was twenty-two and had a baby, Natalie, but soon afterward she realized she'd made a mistake about her husband, and around that time she happened to run into Moore at the Flint *Voice* office. They talked about their mutual love of Bruce Springsteen. They loved Springsteen so much that sometimes they would go to his concerts even though neither of them had a ticket. "We just wanted to stand outside and hear whatever we could through the walls," she says. "Just go soak up the karma." Glynn's parents were poorer than Moore's; they couldn't afford to keep their six kids in Catholic school. Her whole family worked for General Motors—both maternal grandparents, her paternal grandfather, and all eight of his children. Glynn had started her own graphic-design business and opened a gallery, but neither she nor Moore thought about the future, or of a life outside Flint. "We didn't have much ambition," Glynn says of those days. "There wasn't talk of dreams. Maybe it was 'Wouldn't it be cool to own a movie theatre? Yeah, that's a cool idea.' Things just kind of happened."

Back in the Playhouse, the questions continued.

"The only thing we could do in any way to stop this happening is just to stop working," a middle-aged man in the balcony suggested, talking about the war. "Then they'll have no money to fund guns."

This was, in fact, the logical extension of a point that Moore makes often, that American and British citizens are responsible for the war because it is being funded by taxes; but Moore seemed taken aback by such a radical notion. A general strike! It was an idea from the twenties. The working class of Liverpool hadn't changed in eighty years. For Moore, it was strange and wonderful to stumble across a living specimen of what, in America, seemed irrevocably

past—like spotting a pterodactyl in the sky! The days of the sitdown strikes, Flint in the thirties, loom very large for Moore. To him, they represent everything that America should be about—solidarity, working-class consciousness, unselfishness, a correct understanding of the greater good. It is important to him that he can claim one relative—Laverne, his uncle by marriage—who took part in them. But the sitdown strikes succeeded too well.

As a result of the strikes, and the union negotiations that took place over the subsequent decades, autoworkers became middle class. By the time Moore was growing up, his father, as a member of the United Auto Workers, was entitled to free medical care, free dental care, and four weeks of paid vacation. If he needed legal help for any civil matter, the union provided a lawyer free. He had two cars and owned his home outright. He lived not in the city of Flint itself but in Davison, a white middle-class community a few miles away. His family took nice vacations and he sent his three children to college. Moore's father didn't particularly like his work at the plant, but it paid well and could be relied upon—something he appreciated, having grown up in the Depression. He worked the first shift, from six until two, then played golf at the public course—paid for by families whose money came from General Motors—down the street from the factory. He retired with a full pension after thirty-three years, at the age of fifty-three, whereupon he took it easy and did volunteer work at the church.

The trouble was that the workers who had become middle class began thinking middle class. "People started to believe that the factory would always be there, that the health benefits would always be there, the four weeks' paid vacation," Moore says. "So when the company started taking them away people were, like, 'Whoa, what's going on?' Well, when was the last union meeting you went to? 'Never been to a union meeting.' Do you vote in every election? 'I try to.' Everybody got their two cars, their house in the suburbs, their snowmobile, their cabin up north, and decided to check out from job No. 1, which is being a citizen of the United States of America."

The autoworkers played golf like their bosses and forgot that those bosses did not have their best interests at heart. "That's the sad change that took place," Moore says. "I mean, look at all these union people who voted for Reagan. They got sucked into this Horatio Alger thing—you know, let's not be too critical of these tax breaks for the rich because we might be rich someday. All these guys back in the shop, they all had a scheme, they had an idea, they had an invention. But then they started doing things like buying houses in the inner city where you can get them really cheap, renovate them, and be landlords. I can't tell you how many guys I know in the shop that have done that. And it's, like, wait a minute, you're not supposed to be a landlord! You're the worker! We're not supposed to be these people who are jacking up rents and being the Man."

It's odd that Moore gets so angry on the subject of autoworkers becoming landlords, because he is constantly irritated by people asking him how he can continue to represent the working class now that he has so much money. Moore believes that only rich people ask him this question.

Working-class people back home in Flint don't consider his money an issue, he says; they just thump him on the back and congratulate him. After all, they'd like to be rich, too. This is the good side of the Horatio Alger myth: the generosity and hopefulness that it spawns; its power to neutralize resentment. "It's part of what I do like about the American dream," Moore says. "The working class in Ireland or Britain is very different. If you put yourself on camera, they would immediately shoot you down, like, 'Who the hell do you think you are?'"

When Moore gets annoyed by people griping about his money—his nice apartment on the Upper

West Side of Manhattan, the private school that his daughter attended—he is not being hypocritical. That sort of pious, ascetic griping is how the left lost the mainstream in the eighties, he believes: it became a bunch of whinging, dowdy, priggish depressives eating boiled vegetables in some dismal ethnic restaurant—who would want to join *that* party? He wants to bring back to the left a sense that pleasure is O.K., that self-indulgence isn't always evil.

He believes in sacrifice: when he got his first large check for “Roger & Me,” he set up a foundation that funds first-time filmmakers, battered-women's shelters, and soup kitchens, among other things. But he doesn't believe in flagellation. “It would have been O.K. not to make that Oscar speech,” he says. “It's O.K. to accept the Oscar and be filled with joy and go out and have a good time. Too many people on the left have failed to do that. When they accomplish something good, the attitude is, ‘We've gotta go on to the next thing.’ If you do that all the time, you're gonna end up a miserable person and lead an unhappy life. You're a human being, first and foremost—you're not a cause.”

The day after Moore appeared in Liverpool, he was to address a group in the student union at Cambridge. The room was a high-ceilinged Victorian Gothic hall with dark wooden beams, a gallery ornamented with coats of arms, and stained-glass windows. Moore, the American, looked fittingly, theatrically, out of place.

“You're stuck with being connected to this country of mine, which is known for bringing sadness and misery to places around the globe,” he told the students. “How's that feel? See, I actually hold Blair more responsible for this than Bush, because Bush is an idiot. . . . I understand why the American public was fooled by the lies: we live in a system of enforced ignorance. The way the media works, the way our education system works, it's all about keeping us stupid. . . . *National Geographic* did a survey of young Americans your age, eighteen to twenty-four. Eighty-seven per cent couldn't find Iraq on the map. Shouldn't it be Rule No. 1 that if you're going to invade a country you should at least know where the country is? Sixty-three per cent could not find England on the map. I mean, folks, really. I think you should say to Mr. Blair, ‘Why are you kissing our ass if we don't even know where the fuck you are?’ . . . But here's the best number from that survey: eleven per cent could not find the United States on the globe.” The students hooted in disbelief. “When you have a country that is this *disoriented*,” Moore said, raising his voice and moving seamlessly into seriousness, “it's extremely easy to manipulate people with lies and fear, and that's how Bush has gotten away with it. That's our excuse. What's yours?”

He'd been talking for about twenty minutes when his sister Anne came in carrying several very large plastic bags, each containing many small packets of Doritos.

“I figured you guys had been sitting here for an hour and a half,” he said (he had shown up nearly two hours late), “so we stopped on the way and got you lunch. It's kind of an American-style lunch—I hope you don't mind.” He started throwing the packets around the room to the students, who grabbed them. “Sorry, you'll have to share,” he said. “But it's still your way, right, to share? You don't want to turn into us—a society where the ethic is me me me me me me me, fuck you.”

Moore wishes that America would become more like other, gentler countries—“a little bit of Norway, a little bit of Costa Rica,” as he puts it. He believes that the government should regulate companies to prevent them from making an excessive profit. If a company wants to move a factory abroad after American workers have made it profitable, he believes that the company

should have to pay reparations to its former employees, just as a husband whose wife has put him through medical school is obliged to pay alimony if he leaves her. (He is not an old-style populist buy-American type, however; he thinks that foreign competition has been used as a bogeyman to distract Americans from corporate bad behavior. In Flint, he drove a Honda.) Moore would set the top tax rate, for those making more than half a million dollars a year, at fifty to sixty per cent; those making more than two hundred thousand a year would pay forty per cent. But he knows that, when it comes to taxes, he is really not mainstream. Free stuff like rights is easy to dole out, but money is different. “Liberals don’t really have the conviction in their gut to see that things are going to change,” he says. “They’d like ’em to change. They’re not bigots. But if it really meant having to share the pie, that’s probably going too far for a lot of people who call themselves liberals.” He pauses. “I guess I’m really talking about class. It’s the thing we dance around, isn’t it? I’m really talking about moneyed liberals as opposed to unmoneyed liberals.” This is why he’s always emphasizing his belief that a society better taken care of is a safer society with less crime.

A male student stood up in the back of the room to ask a question. “You talk about the culture of fear in ‘Bowling for Columbine,’” he said, “so why do you have so much security?”

“Who said that I have so much security?” Moore said, sounding tense.

“Well, you have actually quite a lot,” the student said.

An older man sitting in the front row pointed to three men in the room. The men, who were standing in identical at-ease positions with their hands clasped and their legs apart, were dressed in uniforms consisting of khakis, white shirts, and navy blazers. Each had a small company badge on his lapel and a curly wire coming out of his ear. “They assume that all these men are your bodyguards,” the older man said.

“Why are they assuming that?” Moore asked. “Because they’re black?”

There was a chorus of low oohs in the room, as though to indicate that this was a dirty blow; but then students started clapping, as though to congratulate Moore for scoring a point.

“I’m not in any jeopardy,” Moore told the student who had asked the question. “Don’t worry about me.” He pointed at his entourage: “one’s my pilates instructor, one’s my yoga instructor, that’s my sister Anne, she’s my bodyguard.” People laughed. Having won the laugh, he started talking in a serious tone again. “I have somebody travelling with me who’s working on my next movie,” he told the student. “So that’s what’s up.”

In “Bowling for Columbine,” one of Moore’s central points is that America is a violent society because Americans are fearful. He begins investigating why the country is violent in the usual way, by focussing on the easy availability of guns and bullets, but later he points out that Canadians are just as gun-crazy as Americans yet don’t seem to shoot each other nearly so often. He decides that Canadians are less violent because they are taken care of by the state, and because they are not continually advised by the media to be anxious about criminals and all manner of other things—Y2K breakdowns, razor blades in Halloween apples, killer bees. In a cartoon (in both senses) potted history of America, Moore attributes to fearfulness every shameful aspect of America’s past, from the killing of Indians to slavery and the Klan.

It is because Moore makes such a forceful argument about the perniciousness of fear that the sight of him surrounded by security in a room full of students was so jarring. For the three uniformed men travelling with Moore were, of course, security guards—as Moore did not deny when asked

later on (though they also functioned as assistants). They had been hired by Moore's publisher to protect him on the tour, from Gavin de Becker & Associates, an agency based in Los Angeles. (Gavin de Becker, ironically, has developed a threat-assessment system called Mosaic that, in the fearful atmosphere after Columbine, has been popular with high-school administrators: it involves investigating certain students and evaluating their potential to be violent.) "Look, those who are opposite to me politically are filled with a lot of anger and violence, in a way that our side is not," Moore says. "A reactionary conservative right-winger is filled with a sense of entitlement that can be backed up by force. Because there is hate mail, it all becomes about liability issues. Nobody wants it on their hands if something happens."

It's true that Moore receives hate mail, and there are Web sites devoted to bringing him down (moorewatch.com, bowlingfortruth.com, moorelies.com). But all polarizing political figures get hate mail—it doesn't mean they're in danger. Moore seems to feel, more than most, that people are out to get him and that there are few people he can trust, outside his family. Onstage at the Roundhouse in London in 2002, he criticized the security there so bitterly that, at the last performance, the staff refused to open the theatre's doors until he apologized. (During the same series of performances, he suggested that passengers on the 9/11 planes were too wimpy to resist because they were white.) Moore can be quite paranoid, always imagining conspiracies against him. "If you get into the siege mentality that he has, which is, I'm in the center of capitalist horrible America here, trying to sneak a piece of completely subversive, life-changing, revolutionary television onto the network owned by General Electric and Fox that's going to touch the people of this country and make them take up their torches and pitchforks—well, who can I trust in this battle?" a person who worked for him on "TV Nation" says. "He really believes that he's taking on gigantic powers. Verbal sniping only proves how dangerous his work is, in his mind."

Perhaps it was because of this siege mentality that, when the student asked Moore about his bodyguards, Moore seemed momentarily to panic—and his instinctive response was to attack, and then to say something just short of a lie, delivered in the form of a joke. This last strategy is one he adopts frequently. A few months ago, the TV host and former Florida congressman Joe Scarborough accused Moore of distorting facts, and on the American leg of his book tour Moore took revenge by telling audiences about a little-known incident: a female aide had been found dead in Scarborough's district office with a mark indicating a hard blow to the head. He told them that he'd done a little research on the medical examiner who ruled out foul play, and discovered that he had been fired from his previous position for mishandling a similar case. Of course, he was just kidding around, Moore said. He didn't really think that Scarborough had killed his aide. But wasn't it strange that the case had been kept so amazingly quiet? And wasn't it strange that a twenty-eight-year-old girl who went running regularly should drop dead of a heart condition? Imagine if a dead aide had been found in Hillary Clinton's office!

Moore often says that he's just kidding around. He knows that people feel anxious about not understanding jokes and so if you tell a person you're kidding he will rarely contradict you. If Moore gets the tone just right, he can reach the widest possible audience: the conspiracy nuts will take him seriously and appreciate his insight, while everyone else will think he's joking and appreciate his humor. Every leftist political figure with mainstream aspirations must have a fruitcake technique—a way to retain a hold on the passionate fringe without losing the center—and Moore's is very effective.

Sometimes Moore uses this tactic in reverse. In "Dude, Where's My Country?," under the

headline “Admit that the left has made mistakes,” Moore writes, “Mumia probably killed that guy. There, I said it.” Mumia Abu-Jamal is a holy figure on the left—a black Pennsylvania journalist who wrote about police violence and was sentenced to death in 1982 for killing a white policeman. His supporters claim that he is innocent and that his arrest was politically motivated. Moore’s statement provoked outrage among his fans, and on the “Dude” tour many people stood up in the question-and-answer sessions to challenge him on it. Moore told the questioners that, sadly, they didn’t understand satire: he reminded them that the statement about Mumia appeared in the book a few lines before Moore claimed not to have had sex before he was thirty-two. (It’s true that the Mumia statement appeared in a satirical context, but, as Moore admits, he meant it seriously.) In the end, those who cared about Mumia were assured that Moore still believed in the Cause, while everyone else appreciated his willingness to tip the left’s sacred cows. “You can’t debate satire,” Moore says. “Either you get it or you don’t.”

During the sixties, when Moore was a teen-ager, the left understood satire and the political uses of humor. There were the Smothers Brothers, “Laugh-In,” Lenny Bruce. Yes, there may have been a split between the hippies and the hardworking S.D.S. types, but when the Yippies were formed, to unite them, the combination seemed to work. Stew Albert, a former Yippie, claims Moore as a descendant. He can imagine the two of them rabble-rousing in Berkeley with Jerry Rubin, though, he says, “how well we got along would depend on how tightly he pushed that class proletarian image. We didn’t dress up like workers. We went for a more festive look.” It’s the pranks that make Moore and the Yippies seem similar. On his TV shows, Moore sent a gay men’s choir to sing to Jesse Helms; he tried to present a suitcase full of cash, “corp aid,” to companies that were being fined for malfeasance; he had his correspondent buy some slaves in Mississippi, because the state hadn’t yet ratified the Thirteenth Amendment. Forty years ago, Albert, Abbie Hoffman, and Rubin stood in the gallery of the New York Stock Exchange and threw handfuls of cash onto the floor below and watched chaos erupt as the brokers scrambled for the money. They applied for a permit to encircle the Pentagon and attempt to levitate it in order to rid the building of evil spirits. In 1968, at the Democratic National convention, in Chicago, they put up a pig as a candidate for President. (Moore put up a felon for President and ran a ficus for Congress.)

But in spirit Moore and the Yippies are worlds apart. The Yippies were making fun of institutions so large that they were almost abstractions: they were mocking not Lyndon Johnson but the Presidency; not the head of the Stock Exchange but capitalism in toto (their slogan was “The death of money”); not the Secretary of Defense but all wars. For Moore, though, everything is personal. He’s not angry with capitalism, or even with companies; he’s angry with Roger Smith, the C.E.O. of General Motors, and Philip Knight, the C.E.O. of Nike. He doesn’t fight against war; he fights against Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Bush.

To the Yippies, the world was ludicrous, America (or, rather, Amerika) and its laws and customs were ludicrous, and the goal was to expose this absurdity so thoroughly that Americans would throw it all gloriously out the window and start again. Allen Ginsberg thought that if antiwar protesters in Berkeley were attacked by the police they should respond by singing nursery rhymes or doing mass calisthenics. He wanted protesters to carry placards with pictures of fruit on them. Yippies saw themselves as the offspring of the Dadaists and the surrealists, who had been politicized by the horror of the First World War: Ginsberg’s fruit placards were descended from Dada’s meaningless sound poems; running a pig for President echoed Duchamp signing a urinal

and exhibiting it as art. But Moore doesn't find the world ludicrous, and he doesn't want a revolution. When he talks about what America should be like, he talks about the good old days when people looked out for one another and stuck to old-fashioned values like the Golden Rule. Moore is a satirist, and satire doesn't unseat conventions; it reinforces them.

In one episode of "The Awful Truth," Moore assembled a mobile mosh pit—a crowd of yelling, jumping, dancing, half-naked teen-agers in the open back of a truck. He drove the mosh pit to the headquarters of each of the Presidential candidates in 2000 and told whoever answered the door that he would endorse his candidate if the candidate would dive into the mosh pit (and be held aloft on the hands of the teen-agers) for one minute. All the candidates refused except Alan Keyes, who, encouraged by his young daughter, got up on a stage, smiled, and gamely dove. If the Yuppies had staged this prank, it is likely that Alan Keyes would have come off as the hero—the one who didn't take himself or politics too seriously, who wasn't afraid of weird young people, who would risk his suit and his dignity just for the hell of it. To Moore, though, Keyes was the villain—the one who would stoop so low as to dive into a mosh pit, just to pick up an endorsement.

Between the mid-seventies, when the Yuppies began to fade from public consciousness, and the late eighties, when Moore appeared, the left seemed to lose its sense of humor. "So many battles were lost," Moore says. "When the Vietnam War was over and the freshman class was elected to Congress in '76, people thought that things were going to be good. But the only Democrat who could get elected was a fairly conservative Democrat, Jimmy Carter, who brought back draft registration only a few years after the war, and eliminated federal funding for abortions, and backed the wrong people in El Salvador. And then suddenly Reagan was President. There was a twenty-year period when the only victory the left had was stopping Judge Bork. I think people just became embittered."

"I found the left stifling," Kathleen Glynn says, remembering the eighties. "I didn't like it, I didn't want to be around it, I was bored out of my fucking mind. Being criticized for wearing perfume because it wasn't feminist. And the invisible sign on the door: 'Do not come in unless you know the left alphabet forwards and backwards and all your times tables.' It was intimidating."

During the Vietnam War, comedy had been on the side of the left, because the left was taking the materialist position: while the right espoused lofty goals like saving the world from Communism and establishing freedom, the left wanted to prevent people from dying. But after the war the left became preoccupied with abstract issues: it stopped worrying about death and started worrying about dignity. A large part of what came to be called political correctness in the eighties consisted literally of prohibiting jokes. Meanwhile, much explicitly political comedy migrated to the right—not the religious right but the party-of-prosperity right, the right of money and Martinis and Wall Street. One of the emblematic right-wing humorists of the time, P. J. O'Rourke, appears on one of his book jackets dressed like an investment banker from 1985—suspenders, striped shirt, loud tie, cigar.

It wasn't that after Carter comedians suddenly started voting Republican—comedians then as now were a liberal bunch. But for a decade their comedy for the most part ceased to be political. (The TV show "Roseanne," of course, was a notable exception.) "Everything had been about politics for so long that we got bored with big issues and started talking about weird hair," Merrill Markoe, who worked on "Letterman" in the eighties and was a "TV Nation" correspondent, says. Randy Cohen, who in the nineties contributed to the political humor at "TV Nation," was famous

in the eighties for inventing “monkey cam”—a stunt on “Letterman” in which a small camera was tied to a monkey who ran around the studio. In the past few years, Al Franken has been writing political books that, like Moore’s, have become best-sellers; but during the five years in the eighties when he worked at “Saturday Night Live” there was a tacit agreement at the show, he says, not to take a particular political position. The most popular comedy show that the decade produced, “Seinfeld,” advertised itself as the show about nothing. The Seinfeld, weird-hair style of humor was about as far from political rhetoric as it was possible to get: while Seinfeld and other standup comics talked about things that were such intimate, familiar parts of daily life that they didn’t even have names—the annoying little silver tape in CD packages; the creepy warm feeling of a seat that someone has recently sat on—politicians talked about things that were so abstract that they were only names: terror, freedom, truth.

In the late seventies and early eighties, much of the left stopped producing humor and started analyzing it, with often painfully unfunny results. Leftist intellectuals who had come of age in the sixties began to write about laughter as an anarchic force, overturning power by making it seem ridiculous. They were inspired chiefly by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work was first translated into English and published in America in 1968. Bakhtin described a kind of laughter that flourished in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in the racy writings of Rabelais and Erasmus, and during medieval carnivals in which hierarchies were toppled and social rules gleefully violated in a burst of parodic frenzy. This “people’s laughter,” according to Bakhtin, was quite different from cold, modern, bourgeois satire, which he felt was purely destructive: the people’s laughter was a mockery of everything high-flown and spiritual, but it was also a celebration of everything low, natural, and of the body. This line of thinking came from Nietzsche, who declared, in “The Gay Science,” that purveyors of moralities and religions were compelled to banish comedy because it revealed that all their ideas were really just sublimated physical urges. “There is no denying that *in the long run* every one of these great teachers of a purpose was vanquished by laughter, reason, and nature,” he wrote. “The short tragedy always gave way again and returned into the eternal comedy of existence.”

Recently, comedy has switched sides again. The right has once more become the party of abstractions—the party of terror, freedom, and truth—while humorists on the left like Moore (and Molly Ivins, Jon Stewart, David Cross, and Janeane Garofalo) have reoccupied the low ground of material need. The second President Bush doesn’t lack a sense of humor, but his humor is apolitical. Al Franken points out that in “Journeys with George,” a documentary about Bush’s election campaign in 2000, Bush’s idea of a joke was to swoop his face into the camera. He did this over and over and over and over again.

It may be that comedy moves in cycles for a reason—that a political creed needs both the earthliness of comedy and the air of ideology in order to thrive. “Man *has to* believe, to know, from time to time *why* he exists,” Nietzsche wrote, with divine condescension. “His race cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life—without faith in *reason in life*. And again and again the human race will decree from time to time: ‘There is something at which it is absolutely forbidden henceforth to laugh.’”

Early in 1986, Moore got a call from the San Francisco-based liberal magazine *Mother Jones*, asking him to become the editor. He took the job, of course—it was a big step up—but he was ambivalent about leaving town. “Flint for Frisco? Most locals would’ve somersaulted naked

through a barn fire for that type of option,” Ben Hamper wrote sometime afterward, in his memoir, “Rivthead.” “Not Moore. He had this goofy love affair with Flint.” Moore wanted to spend his last night in town doing something he’d never done before—visiting Hamper on the assembly line. Hamper took him around and showed him where he worked and introduced him to some of the other guys. “My editor couldn’t stop smiling,” Hamper writes. “He looked up and down the line as if this was some kind of breathtaking moment in history.” At the end of the tour, Moore begged Hamper to let him hit a few rivets. Hamper showed him how to do it, and Moore, smiling more than ever, drove them home.

Moore left Flint in the spring of 1986, and Glynn followed in the summer with all their possessions. One of the first things Moore did at *Mother Jones* was give Ben Hamper a column and put his face on the cover. But within weeks of Glynn’s arrival, on their daughter Natalie’s first day at school, Moore was fired. He told the *Times* that he was being punished because he opposed running a piece by the writer Paul Berman that was somewhat critical of the Sandinistas’ human-rights record in Nicaragua. Adam Hochschild, the chairman of the foundation that owns the magazine, said that he had asked Moore to leave because of inadequate job performance (staff members said he was impossible to work with). After he was fired, Moore held a press conference on the steps of City Hall in San Francisco at which he read aloud from a draft of Berman’s article to show how appalling it was. He went on the radio and accused Berman of not speaking Spanish well enough, of not knowing who among the Sandinistas was a Marxist-Leninist and who wasn’t, and, more generally, of being a traitor to the left and giving aid and comfort to Reagan. At the time, the Sandinista solidarity movement was a commanding force on the left, one that had divided suspicious human-rights liberals from those who were so horrified by Reagan’s support of the Contras that they gave the Sandinistas the benefit of any doubt. The latter group was not particularly interested in dissenting views, and Berman soon became a pariah. Accusatory leaflets were distributed from Berkeley to Managua.

The whole affair became a scandal in leftist circles, played out in gossip and on the letters page of *The Nation*. It was an exhibition of precisely the sort of farcical sanctimoniousness that Moore later decried as a sign that the left was becoming insular to the point of self-parody. Moore was “learning to his cost the old rule that the rich are different,” Alexander Cockburn wrote in a column in *The Nation* the week after Moore was fired. “Hochschild is heir to the AMAX mining fortune, and although he has devoted substantial amounts of the family income, originally generated by African wage-slaves, to finance the quasi-liberal periodical *Mother Jones*, he can still behave like a nineteenth-century mill owner. . . . It turned out that the working-class boy from Flint had ideas of his own. This was never the game plan of the rich boy in San Francisco.”

Around the same time, Moore called Ben Hamper and told him that he’d been fired in part for giving Hamper a column. He and Hamper were too working-class for the rich liberals at *Mother Jones*, Moore said. They just couldn’t handle it. Hamper sympathized, but was perplexed, a few days later, to receive a letter in which *Mother Jones*’s managing editor wrote that he hoped that Moore’s getting fired wouldn’t prevent Hamper from writing for the magazine, and asked him to stay on as a columnist. Hamper turned down the offer out of loyalty, and he is still grateful to Moore for changing his life—he tells everyone that he would never have become a successful writer without him. But, having worked with him for years now, he has reservations. “He didn’t treat people well,” Hamper says simply.

All the excitement about Berman’s piece and Hamper’s column and Hochschild’s riches distracted Moore for a while, but when it became clear that, no matter how many people he got

riled up about the Sandinistas, he was still fired, he got very depressed. He sat around the apartment. He ate a lot. The alternative-media world had turned against him—no one would hire him after the scandal. He decided to sue *Mother Jones* for two million dollars in damages for wrongful termination. Luckily, Ralph Nader soon offered him a grant to write a media-critique newsletter from his headquarters, in Washington, D.C. Moore had admired Nader since high school, when he heard him speak, and he had helped Nader's people for years, whenever they needed a point man in Flint or Detroit.

Moore and his family moved across the country for the second time in six months and set up house in Cleveland Park, near the zoo. But Moore had to leave town the week he arrived in order to attend to the lawsuit in California, and then he got a large advance from a publisher, about fifty thousand dollars, for a book (which, in the end, he didn't write) about Flint and General Motors. Moore claims that Nader heard about the advance and called him in to talk about it. "He'd never gotten an advance like that," Moore says. "He got really upset. He said, 'What makes you think you can write about General Motors?'" (Nader's office denies this and points out that Moore was spending more time in Flint than writing his newsletter.) The office manager told Moore that Nader thought it would be best if he moved out of the office.

Shortly after he was fired from *Mother Jones*, Moore flew back to Flint and heard about a round of layoffs at General Motors. He called Kathleen and told her he wanted to make a movie about them. He didn't have any money, so he sold his house. He sold his bed. He organized bingo games. His suit against *Mother Jones* was successful: he ended up with fifty-eight thousand dollars, and he put all that money into the film. In the end, it cost just under half a million dollars to make.

Moore initially thought that he and Glynn would ride around in a minivan and show the film on college campuses and in union halls. Then, at the Telluride Film Festival, he tracked down Roger Ebert on the street and somehow persuaded him to forsake a Peter Greenaway tribute gala and attend a screening of "Roger & Me" instead. Ebert loved the film, and at the Toronto Film Festival the line to get in to see it went around the block.

Big studios started talking to Moore about deals. He had lunch with an executive from Disney, at which he asked how many theatres Disney would show the movie in and what kind of publicity the company would put behind it. He interrogated the executive about Disney's corporate ties to General Motors. He concluded that Disney wasn't really interested in "Roger & Me," only in locking him in to be its next funny guy. He moved on to the New York Film Festival, where the audience gave the film a seven-minute standing ovation. Now everyone wanted to buy it. Moore, feeling his power, began to make unusual demands: he wanted twenty-five thousand free tickets to be given to unemployed autoworkers; he wanted twenty-five thousand dollars to be donated to the five families who were shown getting evicted in the film; he insisted that the movie not be shown in any country that he felt practiced segregation, such as South Africa or Israel; he wanted one seat kept empty for Roger Smith at every showing. But studios kept bidding and the price kept getting higher. Finally, he sold it to Warner Bros. for three million dollars—an unprecedented sum for a documentary.

After the movie's New York Film Festival showing, the Festival's organizers threw a party in a town house on the Upper East Side. Moore and Glynn were thrilled. "It was our big giant night

out in New York. It was like, Wow, isn't this exciting," Glynn says. "This town house was all marble and everything, and paintings on the wall, and carpets were rolled up." But it turned out to be a kind of radical chic—the fancy party that Leonard Bernstein threw for the Black Panthers—in reverse. "They served beans and franks," Glynn says. "We were from the working class, so they thought that was cool. But we knew better than that. When you throw a party, you throw a party. I've never been able to shake it." Shortly afterward, the movie opened in Michigan. Warners gave it extensive publicity, thinking that just this once a documentary might do well in ordinary working-class areas, but it didn't. People went to see Steven Seagal instead.

After the adoration that Moore had received at the film festivals, there was bound to be a backlash, and it came very quickly. In late 1989, Harlan Jacobson, the editor of the magazine *Film Comment*, accused Moore of muddling the chronology in his film, to make it seem that events that took place before G.M.'s layoffs—the city's absurd revival projects, including the building of a large Hyatt Regency, a shopping center, and a theme park called AutoWorld—were a consequence of them. The movie's time line is indeed misleading; and yet it didn't have to be. Some G.M. layoffs took place before those projects—just not the particular layoffs Moore talks about in the film. Moore says he told Jacobson that he considered the story to have started in his childhood, not when he returned to Flint from San Francisco, as it seems in the film. He didn't include actual dates because he didn't want to make that sort of documentary. Jacobson didn't get it, Moore says now. If he wanted exact chronology, he should have watched C-SPAN.

Moore has since been criticized, sometimes inaccurately, for getting facts wrong; he says that he employs fact-checkers and lawyers but that some mistakes inevitably get through. The most recent instance of this problem was Moore's characterization of Bush as a "deserter," which caused considerable embarrassment for the Presidential candidate he had endorsed, Wesley Clark. As is often the case with Moore's mistakes, it was quite unnecessary: he could have drawn damaging attention to the months that Bush went missing from his National Guard duties, but by using incorrectly the military term "deserter" he damaged his own side.

Moore believes that his critics are motivated by agendas that have nothing to do with their overt arguments. "It's always personal," he says. "They want to attack me personally so that people won't listen to what I have to say. Of course, it doesn't work. The readership only expands, the viewership for the movies only expands, and they just look ridiculous in the process."

"I don't think he ever accepted any of the criticism," the former "TV Nation" employee says. "What you have to understand is that there's a little jujitsu move that's common with people who believe they're saving the world, which is, 'The more you attack me,' not 'the more you reveal my flaws' but 'the more you reveal how insecure you are with what I was trying to say—so you attack me on technicalities.'"

Despite the backlash, when Moore came to put together "TV Nation" many people had loved "Roger & Me" so much, and were so happy to be working with Moore, that they would have worked free. His employees expected him to be the ideal boss—after all, he was the defender of the little guy. Moore was a wonderful boss in one respect: he was willing to take a risk on people. "Michael gave so many people the chance to do jobs that they'd never done before, and that's rare in entertainment," Eric Zicklin, a writer on "TV Nation," says. "It was incredibly intoxicating for everybody. We came to work thrilled." Moore was always talking about the Cause, and there was

a sense in the office that the show would be a political inspiration to people, that it was expanding the boundaries of television, that it was, in its own way, a kind of revolution. A few of Moore's stunts did effect some remarkable changes. "TV Nation" reported on undocumented workers who had been fired for trying to form a union, and the adverse publicity got them their jobs back. In "The Awful Truth," he staged a mock funeral for a man whose H.M.O. wouldn't cover his fatal condition, and the H.M.O. agreed to change its policy. (Later, in "Bowling for Columbine," he took two students who had been wounded in the shooting to the headquarters of Kmart and persuaded Kmart to stop selling bullets.)

But, as the staff of *Mother Jones* had discovered, Moore wasn't the ideal boss. Little by little, he began to alienate people. He disliked sharing credit with his writers. He would often come in late. He didn't yell at people: if someone said something he didn't like, he wouldn't argue; he would simply not invite that person to the next meeting, or the person would be fired. There was something of a split on the show between comedy people and activists or documentary types. Moore gradually realized that he didn't like working with comedy people, and stopped hiring them. Over the years, as he found a small group he trusted, he grew more confident and learned to delegate, and his projects grew more peaceful. "Along the way the side of the road was littered with a lot of bad comedy, wasted time and bitter individuals," Glynn writes now, in an e-mail. "Past employee grumblings are somewhat pointless. . . . They exist in a comedy ghetto, one we have pole-vaulted over."

One day during production on the first season of the show, Moore called two of his writers into his office. It was, for both of them, their first job in television, and they had been hired with the title of associate producer. They were not members of the Writers' Guild, the powerful union for writers in movies and TV, and thus were not receiving health benefits, and would not qualify later for a percentage of video and rerun sales. "Michael said, 'I'm getting a lot of heat from the union to call you guys writers and pay you under the union rules,'" Eric Zicklin, one of the associate producers, says. "'I don't have the budget for that. But if they keep coming down on me that'll mean I'll only be able to afford one of you and the other one's gotta go.'"

Moore appeared to have surmised (incorrectly) that the two writers had been appealing to the union behind his back. (Moore says that he doesn't remember this and that he insisted that "TV Nation" be a union show.) "He wanted to let us know that this would hurt us if it continued," Zicklin says. "We were scared out of our minds. It was like a theme from 'Roger & Me.'" Of course, no one would have thought twice about a meeting like that with any other boss—but this was Michael Moore.

One by one, his employees stopped believing in the Cause. The job became just a job, and Moore became just another boss in a business that had an almost limitless tolerance for bad behavior. But, because they had once believed in him, their disappointment was painful. "I have let go of Michael," the former "TV Nation" employee says, in the shakily resolute tone of a reforming alcoholic. "I have not seen one of his products, his movies, his TV shows, his books. I'm sure they're all good. I'm sure they're spreading the message and enraging all the right people. But I can't accept him as a political person. I can't buy into this thing of Michael Moore is on your side—it's like trying to believe that Justin Timberlake is a soulful guy. It's a media product: he's just selling me something. For the preservation of my own soul I have to consider him as just an entertainer, because otherwise he's a huge asshole. If you consider him an entertainer, then his acting like a selfish, self-absorbed, pouty, deeply conflicted, easily wounded child is run-of-the-mill, standard behavior. But if he's a political force, then he's a jerk and a hypocrite

and he didn't treat us right and he was false in all of his dealings."

"I thought he was great on the Academy Awards," Chris Kelly, who worked on "TV Nation" and "Canadian Bacon," says. "I thought that was a great thing to say. But I can't go to his movies and I can't hold his books for very long. When he started writing his column in *The Nation*, I cancelled my subscription. He broke my heart. That's what he does to people."

Some of Moore's former employees have managed to stay friends with him, and they tend to regard the charges against him as silly. "I think they're a bunch of girls and they should take off their skirts and stop crying," Karen Duffy, a correspondent on "TV Nation" and "The Awful Truth," says. "It's not like they had to lift anything heavy. It's TV! When you're putting out a weekly show, you're under a lot of pressure, but I've worked with him for five years and I've never seen him blow up. I've never done anything I've been more proud of than working with Michael Moore. I just hate the way the left is constantly cannibalizing itself." Perhaps personality shouldn't matter in politics when larger issues are at stake. But Moore himself has made it matter. "Roger & Me" brought personality to a left that believed that facts alone should be enough to move people to action. Moore's work is emotionally compelling because Michael Moore, the fat man in the baseball cap, the passionate working-class whistleblower, the everyman's friend who puts his arm around you when the sadness of the world makes you cry, is leading you through what might otherwise be a disheartening mishmash of calamities.

A few years ago, Moore decided to apologize to some of those he had hurt. He apologized to the "TV Nation" correspondent Merrill Markoe and he apologized to Chris Kelly. "I reached a point, a place in my life where I didn't see myself as a perfect person," Moore says, "and I wanted to apologize for anything I've done or said to people." "He's definitely the product of a Catholic upbringing," Moore's friend Danny Goldberg says. "He's very hard on himself—really, really worries about whether he's doing the right thing and how to do what he's doing better, tortures himself about every little detail." Chris Kelly says, "I think he has a very powerful moral sense. And I think he woke up one day and it occurred to him that everyone who had ever worked with him wasn't working with him anymore."

A week after he spoke in Cambridge, Moore gave a morning performance in Munich, at the Mathäser Filmpalast, a big cinema complex in the center of town.

"I'm sorry I have to speak in English," he said to the audience, after asking them to forgive him for being nearly an hour late. "See, I'm American, we don't learn foreign languages. But that's why we're smiling all the time—you can see us coming down the street, you know. Hey! Hi! How's it going? We've got that big shit-eating grin on our face all the time because our brains aren't loaded down."

At the beginning of the question period, a middle-aged man in the front row had the microphone: "It is known that oil interests have profoundly supported the Bush family for generations, but it is not widely known, though there is a lot of comment in some press, that organized crime has a profound influence on the Bush family. Can you comment?"

"I don't want to comment on that right now. I'm making a movie and I've been looking into some of these things you're discussing," Moore said. "The film's called 'Fahrenheit 9/11'—the temperature at which truth burns."

Another man in the front row rose to speak: “I think you must have heard about the Pearl Harbor theory, that the Americans knew exactly what was going to happen in Pearl Harbor, they let it happen, and everybody knows what was the retaliation of that. Do you see any repeating of history, and what would be your recommendation for our peace in the world?”

At this point, Moore decided to pause and investigate a little.

“How many people in here believe that Bush knew not just that something was going to happen but exactly what was going to happen on 9/11?” he asked.

About twenty-five people out of the thousand in the audience raised their hands.

“And how many believe that the American government had something to do with executing the attacks on September 11th?”

About the same number believed it. Moore paused. “Well, I don’t believe that the Bush Administration had something to do with September 11th,” he said quietly. “I do believe that there were a lot of warning signals, but I don’t think they were ignored on purpose—Bush just wanted to go to the ranch for a month.”

Twenty-five out of a thousand is unusually low for a German audience. Munich is a fairly conservative city in the Bavarian south. A recent poll found that twenty per cent of Germans believed that the C.I.A. organized the attacks on the World Trade Center; the figure was thirty-three per cent for Germans under thirty. Another poll, conducted shortly before Moore set out on his tour, found that nearly sixty per cent of Europeans believed Israel to be, of all the countries in the world, the “biggest threat to world peace,” and that, in a grading of such threats, the United States outranked Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Afghanistan. Moore is not quite that European in his views, but he comes close. He believes that the United States should not take military action under any circumstances except emergency self-defense. He is not opposed to all military intervention per se, but he feels that the U.S. should feel obliged to refrain from militarism until it has restored its moral reputation.

The question period continued; a young man in a corduroy jacket had the microphone.

“Germany’s paid for these really bad things that they did to the Jewish years ago,” he said.

“America doesn’t pay anything to the Indians when they did really bad things. Can you tell me please what is the reason that nowadays no one is discussing to get the Americans to pay for what they did in Iraq?”

“Because we’re Americans,” Moore told him with tired sarcasm. “Why should we have to pick up our mess?”✦