

Reviews

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Fahrenheit 9/11. Directed by Michael Moore.
The Weather Underground. Directed by Sam Green and Bill Siegel.

Missing the Anti-War Movement in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*



Fahrenheit 9/11 is an entertaining and moving film, one which raises crucial concerns about the inequities of US capitalism, the human costs of US militarism, and the propagandistic nature of US media and government. Unfortunately, however -- as several astute critics have recently noted -- the movie fails to develop its radical "moments" into a coherent critique of US imperialism. Focusing almost exclusively on the "exceptional" Bush administration, the film ignores the continuities of US government

motivation and method in dealing with Iraq, the Middle East, and the World since World War II. Moore's previous work, *Bowling for Columbine*, suggests that he knows better, and that he is well aware of the mass-murders endemic to US foreign policy, in Southeast Asia, in Central America, in Iran, in Kosovo, as well as in Iraq. Yet *F9/11* seems to have repressed this "un-American" knowledge in order to settle into a patriotic populism that obscures the history of US "intervention" -- both in the Middle East and beyond.

It must be said that the movie does effectively (and often hilariously) dramatize a whole slew of criticisms of the second Bush administration, and of the Iraq War, and that, moreover, it succeeds in presenting these criticisms in a poignant and creative way, using previously unseen, "inside" footage to electrify old points grown cold, and a musical score that imbues the facts with sentiment and irony. Indeed there are plenty of shocking and radical moments in *F9/11*, such as when a young Iraq war veteran, Corporal Pederson, tells Moore that he'd rather go to jail than go back to Iraq "to kill other poor people," or when an older Iraqi woman -- five of her family killed by US bombs -- rages at the camera and screams up to God to destroy the houses of the American invaders in revenge for their crimes.

But in the end, Moore's short-sighted pragmatism blinds him to the point that his film finally suggests that the great moral problem facing Americans today is not that the US military dominates large parts of the world for the benefits of our ruling classes, but simply that the Bush Administration, in this rare and exceptional case, did not tell us and "our" soldiers the truth. Indeed, Moore's *F9/11* repeatedly indulges in the populist fantasy of the US as "great" "freedom-fighting" nation, sentimentalizing the suffering of the US

military as "gifts given to us." "They fight, so that we don't have to . . . so that we can be free," Moore explains in a preachy, pandering moment near film's end.

Along similarly "patriotic" lines, it must be noted that Moore completely evades the topic of US support for Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, and with it the plausible theory that neoconservative imperial ambitions and Zionism -- not just war-profiteering -- were key motivations driving the Bush administration to invade Iraq. Indeed, while Moore suggests that the Saudis have undo influence on the US government, he never so much as speculates about the US government's uncritically pro-Israel policies. Moreover, Paul Wolfowitz, neocon ideologue of the Bush-Cheney administration, never appears in the film except for in the opening sequence, where he spits into his comb to fix his hair. (For more serious documentary examination of these and related issues see the *Peace, Propaganda, and the Promised Land*, as well as *Hijacking Catastrophe*, both produced by the Media Education Foundation.)

Furthermore, practically speaking, despite several quick jabs at the spineless Democratic Party, Moore's film never gestures beyond the horizon of Kerry-Edwards, giving almost no attention at all to the unprecedented, preventive worldwide anti-war movement.

Was I naïve to have been surprised and upset by Moore's silencing of the left? Early on in *F911*, I sensed reasons to hope that Moore would point beyond the two-party-system, towards the need for independent political movement and action. Near the beginning of the film, after all, recounting the "theft" of the 2000 election by George W. Bush, Moore shows the Senate Democrats complicit in Bush's rise to power by refusing to sign onto the protests of African-American Representatives from the House when they speak out against the exclusion of non-white voters from the rolls in Florida. The all-white US Senate, including forty-odd white Democrats and Al Gore, sit silently, shamefully passive in the face of Republican power.

Following this sequence, Moore cuts to footage of the 2002 "Shadow Inauguration" where tens of thousands of militant anti-Bush protesters took it upon themselves to block the Bush's inaugural procession in D.C. At this point in the film, Moore appears to be genuinely on the side of these outraged people in the street (as opposed to the politicians in Congress). This egg-chucking direct action, Moore narrates, forced newly inaugurated President Bush to double back and forego the ceremonial walk into the White House. Similarly, in Moore's review of the process by which the USA PATRIOT ACT was voted into law, the government as a whole comes in for deserved criticism for passing this proto-fascist bill almost unanimously, without most of Congress having bothered to read it amidst the post-911 paranoia.

But when it comes to the crucial period leading up to the invasion of Iraq, the period of the Bush administration's intense propaganda effort to manufacture consent and Congressional approval for its invasion of Iraq, Moore loses sight of those people in the street. The left is left out. Hiding behind the unexamined "fact" that a "majority of Americans trusted Bush" about Iraq -- a fact which itself is not so clear -- the film paints a picture of an America without dissent from the war-mongers' consensus. In fact, despite his mockery of mass media manipulation, the picture that Moore presents us of political consciousness in US in the lead-up to war is not much different from the "self-portrait" that predominates in the US corporate media: there is no dissent; no serious anti-war feeling; everyone naively trusts "our" President. It is as if we were all -- like the majority of Kerry Democrats in the Senate -- convinced by the administration's claims: about

Iraq's WMDs, about Iraq's propensity to use such weapons if it had possessed them, about Saddam's ties to Al-Queda and Osama Bin Laden, about the likelihood of US occupation bringing real democracy or security to the Iraqi people, about the "surgical" nature of US Cruise missile strikes.

Shamefully, there is not a trace in the film of the more than one million Americans, and of the over ten million people worldwide who took to the streets--in many cases took *over* the streets -- just on Feb. 15, 2003 *alone* -- to publicly oppose the US attack on Iraq. Even CNN and the networks were forced to cover *that* day of mass protest, yet *F9/11* leaves it out. *Why?* As I write this, it saddens and frustrates me to think of what Moore might have done with this poignant piece of repressed contemporary history.

In response to criticism of *F9/11*, Moore has often spoken rightfully of how -- contrary to the cliché -- it is critical to "preach to the choir" in order to fire them up and get them singing loud and clear to the unconverted. This in mind, how vindicating and energizing it would have been for anti-war activists -- and how potentially illuminating for others -- if Moore had bothered to represent the prophetic views and to dramatize the diverse, militant, global mass actions of the anti-war movement of 2002-3?! It could have made for a great film-sequence -- the record breaking crowds in London, Madrid, and Rome, all those different placards and protest art ranging from liberal to radical in message, the vivacious street theatre, the police riots in California, as well as in Egypt. It would have fired activist types up, while forcing all viewers to grapple both with the *international* nature of the current conjuncture as well as with the idea that there is (or could be) an alternative (or if you will a supplement) to "lesser evil" voting-and-hoping in the US, a praxis beyond and better than the ballot box, where people who really want to end the war in Iraq could put their outrage, time and energy.

Without any alternative praxis visible, *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s select examples of people undergoing political "transformation" due to the war on Iraq fall flat. "I used to be a Republican, now I'm going to work for the Democratic Party where I live," just about sums it up. (Multiplied three times.) Such statements of political "awakening" are quite different, and much more debilitating, than statements such as: "I'm going to work to end this war," or "We've got to end the occupation of Iraq now." No one in Moore's film utters such a "controversial" anti-occupation (let alone an anti-imperialist) statement -- though presumably "Bring the troops home now (or at least very soon)" is still Michael Moore's own political line.

It seems likely, of course, that the omission of the anti-war movement from *Fahrenheit 9/11* stem from Moore's reluctance to criticize or embarrass John Kerry in this crucial election year. Kerry, after all, not only voted for the Senate Resolution authorizing the use of force vs. Iraq, but -- while millions were in the street demolishing Bush's argument for war -- spoke in strong support of the "use of force" resolution on the Senate floor (Oct. 9, 2002).

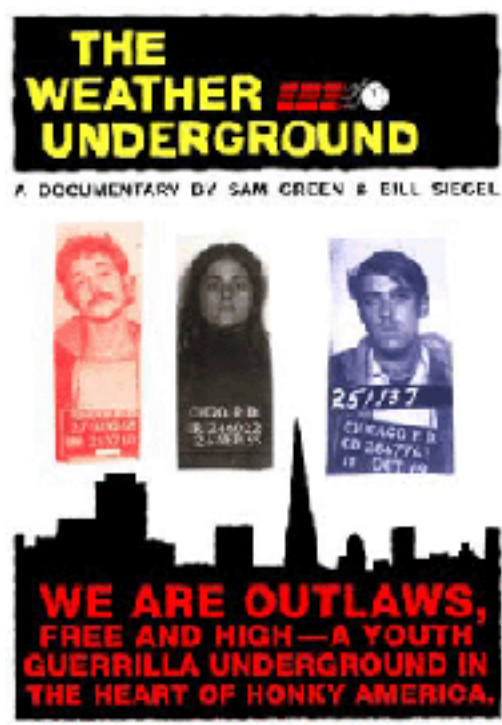
My final worry is that Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for all its creative virtues and its radical populism, masks from view the alternative, and "actually existing" forms of political agency needed to end the current US imperialist occupation, and hence does little in the end to make millions of Moore-loving Bush-haters aware that politics do in fact exist beyond the frustrating offerings of the two-(war)-party system. Indeed, if the post-film theatre cheers of "Vote for Kerry!" which accompanied the rolling of Moore's credits (even in the liberal "safe-state" where I reside) are any indication, for many folks the film would seem to be reinvigorating faith in the Democratic Party establishment,

rather than challenging them -- as is the task of anti-imperialists in this country today -- to push beyond it.

Blown Backwards by the Past: A Review of *The Weather Underground*

Directed by Sam Green and Bill Siegel, nominated for a 2003 Oscar, and now finally available on DVD, *The Weather Underground* hauntingly chronicles and contextualizes the "life and death" of the Weathermen (later the Weather Underground), a radical left splinter-sect from Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In 1969, enraged by US military genocide in Southeast Asia, and frustrated at the failure of the more pacifist anti-war movement to stop the war, the Weathermen split from the broader student anti-war movement and SDS to "bring the war home." They took their name from the Bob Dylan lyric, "You don't need a weatherman to tell which way the wind blows" and began from the political premise (to put it bluntly) that all rich and most working-class white people within the US were complicit with the US war crimes in Southeast Asia, and indeed were "the enemy" in their tolerance of an intolerable, imperialist status quo. After publicly breaking with SDS, the Weathermen challenged the Chicago police to street combat in what were known as the "Days of Rage," and -- after that didn't go so well -- formed secret revolutionary cells and went *underground* in cities across the US (hence the name-change).

Imagining themselves as the white rebel allies of revolutionary (I am tempted to write *real* revolutionary) organizations like the Black Panther Party, as well as third-world struggles for national liberation, the Weathermen hoped to spark black people and working-class youth into a domestic uprising against the US government. For more than a decade, their members waged guerilla war against symbols of American power, bombing the D.C. Capitol building, and the offices of the New York Police Department, among other targets.



Articulate, young, well-educated, and media savvy, the group became cult icons to some in the student counterculture, while serving as poster-children for Nixon's crusade against domestic "anarchy." (Fred Hampton of the Chicago Black Panther Party, on the other hand, criticized the Weathermen as "opportunistic, chauvinistic, individualistic, anarchistic, and Custeristic." For Hampton, the Revolution was a community process of building, mobilizing and organizing for change, not simply a demolishing of "the system" as it stands.)

After the accidental explosion of a bomb in a New York basement apartment killed three cadre (the WU members had been building the device in order to massacre a group of non-commissioned military officers at a dance-hall), the traumatized Weathermen

revised their bombing philosophy, vowing to target only *empty* buildings in symbolic response for acts of US imperialism, repression, and injustice. (More than one former Weathermen in the film in fact insist that the group made substantial efforts to assure that no human beings would be hurt by their attacks.) This symbolic bombing campaign they kept up all the way through the 1970s. Though never caught by the FBI, over the course of the decade the group gradually dwindled and dissolved, with many members of the group re-emerging from hiding. Some returned to serve prison sentences, others to freedom, some to repent, others to continue lives of progressive action.

The narrative of the documentary *The Weather Underground* strings together gritty, previously unseen film, television, and radio footage, pausing at regular intervals to bring us the comments, remembrances, and reflections of a number of the original historical participants. These include former members of the Weather Underground -- both repentant and unrepentant -- as well as an FBI agent who was attempting to capture them, and Todd Gitlin, a former President of SDS who still fumes at the memory of how the left-sect Weathermen helped to split and to marginalize the broader student anti-war movement.

In clear sympathy for the anti-imperialist perspective -- though *not* for the terrorist tactics of its subjects-- *The Weather Underground* maintains a balanced, non-manipulative, and non-didactic tone. Though its subjects engaged in guerilla warfare for decades, the film forgoes the -- often comical -- guerilla "gotcha" tactics of Michael Moore, for a more subtle and multi-layered, multi-perspective approach that seriously poses questions and critically contextualizes events, without providing easy answers.

In our culture, it takes a lot for a documentary -- let alone a politically left-wing one -- to reach a mass audience. And so as I was contemplating this article several months back, right as *The Weather Underground* was being shamefully passed over for the Oscar -- the winning director of the remarkably non-radical film, *Fog of War*, Errol Morris, all too tentatively taking up Michael Moore's anti-war mantle from last year -- describing the war in Iraq as another "rabbit hole" like the one the US went down in during Vietnam -- for a moment I despaired. After all, what movie theatres would bother showing a left-wing documentary unless it was an official "award-winner"? Still now I wonder to what extent *Fog of War* has obscured this even more crucial anti-war documentary.

That *WU* didn't win isn't exactly surprising of course. For though the film was widely praised --the *New York Times*, for instance, called it a "terrifically smart and solid piece of film-making" -- there remains, to my reading -- even in the many positive reviews -- a resistance to the film's key left-wing messages. In fact most of the dozen or so major reviews that I read in researching this article did their best to avoid confronting the toughest questions posed by the film, instead reading it principally in terms of the horrifying and yet fascinating tale of Weathermen "terrorism."

In our post-911 era, when the "war on terrorism" is invoked to justify just about every kind of government action from the invasions of privacy to the invasion of Iraq, it shouldn't surprise that -- however deeply impressed by the film they are -- most mainstream reviewers interpret it primarily as a "cautionary tale" of how idealism may descended into terrorism, a story of how the Left's obsession with the violence of US foreign policy eventually transformed it into the "evil which it deplored." In fact, film-maker Sam Green *has* told Alternet.org in an interview that "the alienating danger of thinking you have THE answer to this immensely difficult challenge [the challenge of stopping the war, or of opposing US imperialism] is one important aspect of the *WU*

story for people to consider." Surely there are elements of the militant ultra-left that today can benefit from this piece of wisdom.

But such a "cautionary" response to the film, while partially true, and certainly understandable post-911, remains blind to the work's most powerfully resonant, and continuingly relevant, insights: chiefly, that the vast majority of the political violence of this era -- as in ours -- is wrought *by the US government*, not by anti-government radicals, and that this has been true not only in Southeast Asia and around the world, but *even within the US of A*. The film quotes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1967 -- at which time he was labeled "the most dangerous man in America" by the FBI -- denouncing the US as "the largest purveyor of violence in the world," and it validates his claim, not only with shocking video footage and staggering statistics from the brutal air and land attacks in Southeast Asia (which killed 2-5million), but with just-as-shocking footage of Black Panther Fred Hampton's blood-stained bedroom moments after he and fellow Panther Mark Clark were assassinated by the Chicago PD in 1969. (Indeed the Chicago Panthers had been labeled by J. Edgar Hoover as amongst the biggest "threats" to the "internal security of the US" precisely because, while advocating a practical, revolutionary, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist program they had remained deeply hostile to violence -- working to end racial gang wars in their city for instance -- and had abstained from the violent rhetoric of radicals like the Weathermen.)

Among other episodes usually absent from mainstream reviews of the film, the documentary details how an anonymous "Chicago Citizens' Committee" -- by stealing FBI files and distributing them to the media -- helped to expose the FBI's systematic infiltration, disruption, and repression of the entire left -- including the Black Panthers and the Weathermen, but also Martin Luther King's civil rights' organization and SDS -- through its Counter-Intelligence Program, known as COINTELPRO. Thus while Malcolm X has become infamous for his the phrase "By any means necessary," the film shows that it was the *US government* that truly put this phrase into practice in its cynical and often deadly efforts to destroy radical social movements in this country.

All of this "contextual" footage in the film not only makes the overly zealous, slightly crazy reaction of Weathermen more comprehensible to the post-modern viewer, it also disrupts the moral simplicity of liberal or conservative interpretations of the film as a one-sided "warning" about the dangers of radicalism. Such anti-radical interpretations tend to imply that the "safe" and "moral" way to prevent such leftist excess is to stick to the conformist "center" of US political discourse, a place that this film makes clear is far from "pure." After all, middle-American tax-dollars were funding the FBI's extreme and illegal actions, as well as the military's genocidal carpet bombings in Southeast Asia.

Sam Green himself has stated that he's "much more interested in moral ambiguity, than in moral certainty." And indeed the final moments of *The Weather Underground* trouble any "pure" political stance, leaving us instead with the echoing words of middle-aged Mark Rudd, an ex-Weatherman, while the screen casts us flying backwards over fertile green fields of Southeast Asia. As we listen to Rudd's closing reflections, our field of vision is crisscrossed by American missiles, fired from just beneath our line-of-sight, homing in and exploding upon village roofs and jungle canopy. Houses and trees burst into flame, while we are cast blindly backward wherever the helicopter may take us. While we look out from the chopper, Rudd admits to the microphone that he is ashamed of some of what he did in the Weathermen, and that the terrorist-style approach was wrong and ineffective. Yet he closes by saying that what he still believes they were *right* about one thing: the knowledge that the United States Government, the government under which we still live, was and remains today the most violent and destructive imperialist

power on earth. "This knowledge we couldn't handle. It was just too big." Rudd says, "We didn't know what to do with it." This problem, he tells us, of "what to do with this knowledge" still burns in his stomach to this day. To this day, as the houses still burn before our eyes.

Watching this final sequence for the second time, I was reminded of Walter Benjamin's famous and provocative ninth Thesis on History, which reads:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

So fixated were the Weathermen on the violence, and the piles of newly dead that lay before their eyes, that they neglected the problems of building and preparing for the future, a continually catastrophic future that in Benjamin's figure, lay behind them.

The tragedy of the Weathermen, as it comes through the film, is that though this group possessed this radical knowledge, they had little practical understanding of the material conditions and structural and cultural forces that kept many working-class and poor people in the US from "taking a stand" against imperialism and capitalism in the direct and revolutionary fashion that the Weathermen fantasized they would, and insisted that they must. Conversely, they lacked a program to teach and to empower people to challenge day-to-day systems of domination for themselves. Thus, after the masses failed to rise at their rally-call, they lost faith in the average American's ability to take action, and went it alone -- with the help of their upper-class bank accounts. The example of the Black Panthers, on the other hand, feeding poor city kids free breakfasts, offering political education classes to working-class adults, and vowing to defend the community against police harassment and "pig" terror -- alas they were not ready for the extent of the repression that was to be aimed at them -- comes subtly through *WU* as an alternative, and more politically viable revolutionary practice.

In the end, however, the question that *The Weather Underground* leaves us with is not just "How could all this happen?" -- the question of immediate interest for many mainstream commentators -- but rather "What do we *do* with this terrible, burning knowledge?" What do we do here in the belly of the beast, while the United States government drops cluster bombs on Iraqis, tortures detainees, and funds Israeli war crimes in the Palestinian territories, while contriving coups in Haiti, and Venezuela, and (God forbid) in Cuba? It is here that the film leaves us, and here where meaningful anti-imperialist theory and practice must begin.