

# The heat is on

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [July 13, 2004](#) issue

Since bursting onto the national scene in 1989 with his celebrated documentary *Roger & Me*, Michael Moore has gone from being that goofy overweight filmmaker in tennis shoes and a baseball cap to being the resolute voice of the common American. His battles with the powers-that-be have cast him as a modern-day Frank Capra. His biting attack style is reminiscent of satirists like Swift, Twain and Mencken.

*Fahrenheit 9/11* has been at the center of controversy since its genesis. The controversy grew more heated when the film won the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival and Moore received a standing ovation from the mostly European audience. Moore does more in this film than address corporate insensitivity (as he did in *Roger & Me*) or assail the out-of-control American gun culture (*Bowling for Columbine*). He goes toe to toe with the president of the United States and his administration, brazenly suggesting that the Bush family's business dealings have had a direct impact on the president's foreign policy.

The film is laid out chronologically, beginning with a hilarious montage explaining how Bush "won" the state of Florida and thereby the 2000 presidential election. Moving to the White House, Moore portrays the president as village idiot, a man who is in so far over his head that his only recourse is to take vacation after vacation, leaving the day-to-day running of the office to the vice president. Bush was headed for a lame-duck presidency, the film suggests, until September 11.

Moore handles that day with sensitivity and cinematic panache. He provides no dramatic shots of the attacking planes or burning buildings, only the sickening sounds, over black, of the towers being hit. He then fades up to reaction shots of people on the street below, including a few screaming about jumpers.

A fascinating transition takes place during those now famous minutes when Bush, reading to schoolchildren, first learns of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center. (He already knew about the first plane, we discover.) Bush sat there, stone-faced, for over seven minutes while his aides silently urged him to do something,

anything. This curious fact provides a prime opening for Moore to imply that what Bush was thinking about in those minutes was his family's unholy business alliance with the wealthy bin Laden family, who may not have been as distant from Osama as had been reported.

The film stresses that on the days immediately after 9/11, when all air traffic was shut down, the government flew the entire bin Laden clan (along with a few Saudi Arabian diplomats) out of the country for their own safety, and it asks why these relatives were never interrogated.

The film alleges that the Bush family's hands were so filthy with Saudi money that they were willing to overlook the possibility that the terrorists on the planes that day might have had Saudi connections. (It turned out that of the 19 terrorists, 15 were from Saudi Arabia.)

Moore skillfully suggests that Bush's desire to deflect attention from Saudi Arabia was accomplished by rushing into Afghanistan and pointing the finger at Iraq. That way, he could not only complete the war against Saddam Hussein that his father had left unfinished, but also provide spoils that would prove beneficial to his oil buddies.

Whipping through other topics, Moore dissects the Patriot Act, calling it an anti-American diversion that employs fear to keep people in line; points to the high percentage of poor and unemployed in the military; chronicles the loss of civilian life in Iraq; charts the unhappiness of U.S. soldiers fighting there; and analyzes the state of mind such unhappiness breeds, leading to the humiliation and torture of Iraqi prisoners.

Some call the film biased and mean-spirited. Yes, Moore goes out of his way to portray a key player as a bumbling bureaucrat (John Ashcroft) or a war profiteer (Dick Cheney). But Moore is not an even-tempered artist. He is an angry provocateur. His thesis is that it is impossible to fight a moral war if it's based on immoral reasons, and that once the immorality is unloosed, it takes on a life of its own.

*Fahrenheit 9/11* may be harsh and one-sided. But with Americans and Iraqis dying in Iraq and a presidential election looming, it feels like a provocation at the right time.