

# *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the Ethics of Criticism

Roger Fritts  
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I should begin by explaining that I am a conservative when it comes to protesting wars. When I was young, I would wear a white dress shirt, dress blue pants and wing tips to antiwar demonstrations. Clean shaven and without any protest buttons, I would walk right into political events while my friends with their sandals, blue jeans, T-shirts, long hair, and protest signs, would end up in a fenced in area surrounded by police. By dressing conservatively I could shake hands with Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Vice President Spiro Agnew and President Richard Nixon, and tell them directly that I opposed the Vietnam war. In the case of both Vice Presidents, they stopped to talk with me. Humphrey told me I was a nice young man and a local newspaper reported my conversation with Agnew.

Once at a meeting at a church "Peace Center" I suggested to everyone that they should get their hair cut short, invest in some conservative clothing and join me in my approach to protesting. In my imagination, the President would walk along the airport fence expecting to shake hands with supporters and instead encounter one polite person after another saying "Mr. President I think you should pull the troops out of Vietnam right now." This idea never caught on. Most of my friends were unwilling to sacrifice their long hair or wear conservative clothing.

Still, over the years I have held onto this conservative approach to protesting wars and it played a role in my reaction to the movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

I wanted the movie to be careful with the facts and focus on the issue of the war with Iraq and the Patriot Act, and explain why they were a mistake. It seems to me that a strong case can be made that the war and the Patriot Act have not been in the interest of the nation. The stronger the case, the more likely these policies will change.

I did not want the movie to distort the facts, or get carried away with conspiracy theories, or bash members of the Bush administration. Although in moments of frustration and anger I find making fun of President Bush emotionally satisfying, I do not believe it is an effective way to change government policies. Nor is it consistent with my belief that I should try to follow Jesus' teaching to "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

In early July I went to see Michel Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. With some others in the audience, I laughed at the jokes made at the expense of the President and his advisors and the serious parts of the movie moved me. However, I think it could have been a much more effective tool in convincing people those government policies need to change.

The claims in the movie are not all correct. For example we hear that President Bush spent 42% of his first eight months in office on vacation. This is from a report in the *Washington Post* that counts weekends at Camp David and trips to his Texas ranch. A close review of the President's activity shows that he spent many hours working at both the ranch and Camp David, and that the 42 percent number is simply not correct. We may disagree about

how he chooses to spend his work time, but he did work.

Early in the movie the screen goes blank, and we hear but do not see planes fly into the world trade center. Next we watch President Bush being told by an aide that the nation is under attack. The President sits holding a child's book about a pet goat. Michael Moore does a voice over as we watch the President's face. Moore speculates what the President might be thinking, "Maybe I should have shown up for work more often." I laughed in the movie theater, but even as I did I thought to myself that this was a cheap shot. After all, my own first reaction to the attack was a stunned feeling of denial.

A sudden clash between two mutually exclusive activities can produce a comic effect. Moore shows us a funny and eerie video of President Bush practicing facial expressions before going live with an address to the nation. We get the impression that our president is anxious and unstable.

To lampoon the attack on Afghanistan, Moore uses theme music from the 1960 cowboy movie "The Magnificent Seven" along with clips from other old westerns.

After documenting the lack of any connection between Iraq and the attacks of September 11, the movie cuts to a clip of Condoleezza Rice saying, "Oh, indeed there is a tie between Iraq and what happened on 9/11." The audience laughed at the contradiction between the evidence and her statement. Actually the full quotation is more complex. In an interview Rice said:

Oh, indeed there is a tie between Iraq and what happened on 9/11. It's not that Saddam Hussein was somehow himself and his regime involved in 9/11, but, if you think about what caused 9/11, it is the rise of ideologies of hatred that lead people to drive airplanes into buildings in New York.

Such out of context editing occurs throughout the film.

Moore mocks Attorney General John Ashcroft by pointing out that Ashcroft lost a senate race in Missouri to a man who had died three weeks earlier. "Voters preferred the dead guy," Moore says, delivering one of the film's biggest laugh lines. Moore does not explain that when voters in Missouri cast their ballots for the dead man, Mel Carnahan, they knew they were really voting for Carnahan's widow, Jean. The Democratic governor of Missouri had vowed to appoint Jean to the job if Mel won.

Moore shows us Paul Wolfowitz licking his comb and then spiting on his hand to flatten his hair, just before he testified before Congress. The audience groaned in disgust and laughed. I laughed, but I felt uneasy. Paul Wolfowitz's approach to grooming has nothing to do with government policies.

Near the end of the movie, we see President Bush speaking to a well-dressed audience. He says, "I call you the haves and the have-mores. Some call you the elite; I call you my base." Again many in the audience laughed. The movie does not explain that the speech comes from the October 19, 2000, Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner. The event was the 55th annual dinner, which raises money for Catholic hospital charities in New York City. Candidates Bush and Gore were the co-guests of honor at the event, where speakers traditionally make fun of themselves.

Much as I disagree with the president's policies, I am uncomfortable with the distortions in the movie and the meanness of the ridicule.

Some will argue that Republicans have been very mean to Democrats and that this justifies the satire and ridicule of a movie like *Fahrenheit 9/11*. I sometimes listen to the radio broadcasts of Rush Limbaugh. He ridicules

Democrats and moderate Republicans for three hours, five days a week. I understand the emotional desire to fight fire with fire, to attack and ridicule conservatives the same way Limbaugh attacks and ridicules liberals.

However, I am the guy who went to 1960s anti war protests wearing wing tipped shoes. Most of my life I have tried to live according to the ethical teachings of Jesus. Although Jesus did not wear wing tips, he did say we should do to others as we would have them do to us. This is not easy for me to do. Sometimes I become so frustrated and angry with other people that I respond with sarcasm. Sometimes I want to “do to others before they can do to me.” Still, when I am at my best, I try to follow the Golden Rule.

After I watched *Fahrenheit 9/11*, I wondered, if I were a movie maker instead of a minister, what kind of movie would I make about President Bush and the nation’s War on Terrorism?

I would make a movie that tried to explain the motivations behind the actions of the principal characters in this tragic story. I would explore the life of Osama Bin Laden. Where did he grow up? Who were his mother and father? Who were his friends? What kind of education did he receive? What do we know about his religious background? How did he go from his birth in the 1950s, to being the leader of a terrorist organization in 2001? Why does he hate us? What does he say about his reasons for his attack on our country? What does he want?

Also, I would have similar questions about President Bush. Where was he born? Where did he grow up? What were his mother and father like? Who were his friends? What a type of education did he receive? What do we know about his religious background? What were his motivations for attacking Iraq? What does he want?

I would also explore the lives of the people closest to bin Laden. What do they say about their reasons for their attack on our nation? What do they want from us?

I would explore the lives of the key advisers of President Bush. I would want to know about Richard Cheney. What motivates him? I would want to know about Paul Wolfowitz. Why does he see the world the way he does? I would want to know about Donald Rumsfeld. What makes him tick?

Most critical portraits of the current administration suggest that greed and a love of power motivates these people. Money and power are tempting, but even more tempting, in my experience, is the intense desire we each have to think well of ourselves, to believe that we are contributing to the world, to the human race in important and constructive ways.

I suspect that Osama bin Laden sincerely believes that he is making the world a better place by his actions. This seems bizarre to us, of course. He appears to most Americans as completely evil. It is hard to believe that he could think that by killing innocent people he is making the world a better place.

However, that is what some people in America believe. When one of our bombs accidentally falls on the home of an innocent person in Iraq some Americans feel that although this is a terrible tragedy, it is necessary for the greater good, for the liberation of the Iraqi people from a terrible dictator.

The end of my movie would include some suggestions about what we might do in the United States to bring an end to this world conflict. This is a weakness of the movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*. It is not clear to me what Michael Moore thinks we should do.

My movie would suggest that we continue to work on the development of international police forces that will discover and capture people who are so confused and angry that they continue to use violence as a way of life. Some people are dangerous. It is necessary to use force to capture them, try them, and if found guilty, isolate

them in humane prisons.

My movie would suggest that we withdraw from Iraq. It is *possible*, of course, if we stay in Iraq, that we will eventually be able to create a democratic government in keeping with the wishes of President Bush, but I think this is *unlikely*. Looking at our experience in countries like Haiti, I am skeptical that we can create a democratic government in Iraq. We should continue to offer humanitarian aid to the people of Iraq, but it is time to bring our soldiers home.

My movie would suggest that all of us look again at the teachings of Jesus. I would include a clip of President Bush saying that his political philosopher is Jesus.

If there exists a single universal ethical and moral standard that we human beings agree on, it is what we in our culture have come to call the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." This rule is found not only as a quote from Jesus in the New Testament, but also in the scriptures of all the world's great religions. When I ask adult education classes of Unitarian Universalists to write their own ten commandments, "Do to others as you would have them do to you," always comes first.

Yet living out this moral imperative in our lives is difficult. When I am frightened, when I am confused, when I am angry with injustice, I find it hard to try to understand the point of view of others. The policies of President Bush frighten me. I feel pain as I see the deaths of Americans and Iraqis caused by the President's policies. So part of me enjoys the ridicule, the sarcasm and the cutting humor that I saw in the movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*. It is hard for me always to follow the teachings of Jesus.

The movie has primarily been seen by people who are already unhappy with the President. According to a survey (Annenberg Poll reported in *Time* August 16, page 27) an estimated 8 percent of Americans saw *Fahrenheit 9/11* in July. Eighty-seven percent of the people who went in to see the movie were opposed to the way President Bush is handling Iraq before they saw the movie. Eighty-two percent of the people who went to see the movie were opposed to the way the President has been handling economy before they saw the movie. Few people who like the President's policies have seen the movie.

On the other hand, after the last presidential election, 77% of the people who attended church say that they voted for President Bush. (Reported in the *Washington Post* January 2001.) I am neither a movie maker nor a political adviser. I am a simple parish minister. As a simple parish minister, in this election year, instead of ridiculing President Bush, I encourage all of us to look again at the ethical teachings of Jesus as they actually appear in the New Testament. Jesus was a prophet of Islam, as well as the central figure in Christianity. What did he actually say?

According to the gospel of Luke he said:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you. And if anyone takes away your goods do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Radical stuff. Hard to live by, but worth the effort.