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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Moore's Public Service

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

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Since it opened, "Fahrenheit 9/11" has been a hit in both blue and red America, even at theaters close to military bases. Last Saturday, Dale Earnhardt Jr. took his Nascar crew to see it. The film's appeal to working-class Americans, who are the true victims of George Bush's policies, should give pause to its critics, especially the nervous liberals rushing to disassociate themselves from Michael Moore.

There has been much tut-tutting by pundits who complain that the movie, though it has yet to be caught in any major factual errors, uses association and innuendo to create false impressions. Many of these same pundits consider it bad form to make a big fuss about the Bush administration's use of association and innuendo to link the Iraq war to 9/11. Why hold a self-proclaimed polemicist to a higher standard than you hold the president of the United States?

And for all its flaws, "Fahrenheit 9/11" performs an essential service. It would be a better movie if it didn't promote a few unproven conspiracy theories, but those theories aren't the reason why millions of people who aren't die-hard Bush-haters are flocking to see it. These people see the film to learn true stories they should have heard elsewhere, but didn't. Mr. Moore may not be considered respectable, but his film is a hit because the respectable media haven't been doing their job.

For example, audiences are shocked by the now-famous seven minutes, when George Bush knew the nation was under attack but continued reading "My Pet Goat" with a group of children. Nobody had told them that the tales of Mr. Bush's decisiveness and bravery on that day were pure fiction.

Or consider the Bush family's ties to the Saudis. The film suggests that Mr. Bush and his good friend Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the ambassador known to the family as Bandar Bush, have tried to cover up the extent of Saudi involvement in terrorism. This may or may not be true. But what shocks people, I think, is the fact that nobody told them about this side of Mr. Bush's life.

Mr. Bush's carefully constructed persona is that of an all-American regular guy — not like his suspiciously cosmopolitan opponent, with his patrician air. The news media have cheerfully gone along with the pretense. How many stories have you seen contrasting John Kerry's upper-crusty vacation on Nantucket with Mr. Bush's down-home time at the ranch?

But the reality, revealed by Mr. Moore, is that Mr. Bush has always lived in a bubble of privilege. And his family, far from consisting of regular folks with deep roots in the heartland, is deeply enmeshed, financially and personally, with foreign elites — with the Saudis in particular.

Mr. Moore's greatest strength is a real empathy with working-class Americans that most journalists lack. Having stripped away Mr. Bush's common-man mask, he uses his film to make the case, in a way statistics never could, that Mr. Bush's policies favor a narrow elite at the expense of less fortunate

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Americans — sometimes, indeed, at the cost of their lives.

In a nation where the affluent rarely serve in the military, Mr. Moore follows Marine recruiters as they trawl the malls of depressed communities, where enlistment is the only way for young men and women to escape poverty. He shows corporate executives at a lavish conference on Iraq, nibbling on canapés and exulting over the profit opportunities, then shows the terrible price paid by the soldiers creating those opportunities.

The movie's moral core is a harrowing portrait of a grieving mother who encouraged her children to join the military because it was the only way they could pay for their education, and who lost her son in a war whose justification she no longer understands.

Viewers may come away from Mr. Moore's movie believing some things that probably aren't true. For example, the film talks a lot about Unocal's plans for a pipeline across Afghanistan, which I doubt had much impact on the course of the Afghan war. Someday, when the crisis of American democracy is over, I'll probably find myself berating Mr. Moore, who supported Ralph Nader in 2000, for his simplistic antiglobalization views.

But not now. "Fahrenheit 9/11" is a tendentious, flawed movie, but it tells essential truths about leaders who exploited a national tragedy for political gain, and the ordinary Americans who paid the price.

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