From the days of “Anybody but Bush”

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Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear, & the Selling of American Empire, written and directed by Jeremy Earp and Sut Jhally

Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear, & the Selling of American Empire, written and directed by Jeremy Earp and Sut Jhally, was produced in 2003-04, in order to combat what the filmmakers perceived as public support for the “war on terror” and the Iraq invasion in particular.

A number of socially critical documentaries appeared besides this one, including *The Corporation*, *The Control Room*, *Outfoxed*, *Bush’s Brain*, *Uncovered*, and of course, Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*. An unusual and significant change in American cinema, this trend arises from the attempts of filmmakers, along with much of the rest of the population, to assimilate the traumatic political experiences of recent years.

With interviews, pictures, excerpts from television news and instructive charts, Earp and Jhally prove conclusively that the Bush administration lied about the rationale for war and, in fact, had a hidden agenda. In this regard, their film successfully makes the case that the war was planned long in advance of September 11, 2001, and that the terrorist attacks were used as a pretext to launch the war.

Hijacking Catastrophe, however, is guided by a political outlook that damages its ability to conduct a *full* investigation. Among liberal opponents of the war in 2004, there developed a conception that an electoral defeat of Bush would end the militaristic trend in American foreign policy. To the extent that the filmmakers adopted this idea, they set limits on their own search for the deeper roots of the war within American society.

The Media Education Foundation released the documentary in 2004, one week after the Republican Party national convention, and in time to influence the 2004 elections. No one in the documentary states this explicitly, but the underlying message is clear: “Anybody but Bush.”

Hijacking Catastrophe begins with a series of clips of Bush administration officials making claims that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. In one of these, Bush describes Saddam Hussein as a “homicidal dictator addicted to weapons of mass destruction.” Then, it cuts to a series of clips from the mainstream media months into the war; the pundits and anchors all act surprised that none of these weapons were found. We are then reminded of the well-known comment by Hermann Goering, a Nazi official tried at Nuremburg: “The people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy ... All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked ... and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.”

The film, however, places the entire onus for the war on the group of “neoconservatives” within the Bush administration, namely Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz. It outlines Wolfowitz’s “Defense Planning Guidance,” a 1992 Defense Department document that argued for global hegemony as an aim for US foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War.

The film argues that the “Wolfowitz doctrine” was essentially abandoned by all but a few people within the extreme right of the Republican Party. These are dubbed neoconservatives. Rather than approaching the problem from a class and historical perspective and pointing to the widespread approval that the American ruling elite *whole*, despite tactical differences, has given these policies, the film inaccurately asserts that the neoconservatives were the *cause* of the shift. According to the filmmakers, this tiny group has essentially “hijacked” US foreign policy. From this flows the argument that all Americans must forget their differences and unite to get rid of these hijackers and set US foreign policy back on the proper track.

This argument does not hold water. Consider only that Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz, and other “neoconservatives” have held high level government positions for decades. Moreover, the invasion and occupation of Iraq received the endorsement of virtually the entire American ruling elite, and still does, despite the unfolding disaster! Why did the majority of Democrats in Congress, including their eventual presidential candidate John Kerry, support the invasion? Why did no one in the mainstream media raise a protest or even question the government line? That *Hijacking Catastrophe* does not even pose these questions demonstrates that the filmmakers’ objectivity and determination to expose has a certain limit. Their support for the Democratic Party imposes that limit.

The film points quite correctly to the formation of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) in 1997, which based itself explicitly on popularizing and implementing the Wolfowitz doctrine, as a significant event. We hear chilling passages from its September 2000 Statement, “Rebuilding America’s Defenses.” Arguing for a dramatic expansion of military spending in order to deter any potential rival, the document seems to predict the 9/11 attacks a year before they occurred: “The process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor.”

A few more important points are made in the film. One is the former involvement of the United States with Saddam Hussein. Rumsfeld is shown shaking hands with the Iraqi dictator in 1983 and 1984. Viewers are reminded that when Saddam Hussein used poison gas to kill Kurdish civilians in 1988, the United States considered him an ally. It also exposes Washington’s role in helping Saddam Hussein quell the 1991 Shiite rebellion, which then-president George H.W. Bush publicly encouraged.

About half-way through, the movie finally addresses the war in Afghanistan. In this regard it rightly points to the importance of the proposed Trans-Afghanistan pipeline. We see a map of Afghanistan with the proposed route of the pipeline along with a plot of American bases. Clearly, the United States has planned its bases to be in proximity to the pipeline. Little else, however, is said about Afghanistan.

The “Shock and Awe” tactics of the invasion of Iraq are traced to a 1996 book, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*, by Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade of the National Defense University. Disturbing quotations from this book are read, announcing a brutal strategy to cause massive destruction to intimidate the population of an entire country into submission. This is accompanied by the pictures of Iraqi victims of this policy, suppressed by the media in the United States. This is probably the most moving sequence of the film, combining the cold calculating words of military planners with the images of death and suffering they produced.

A good deal of what the film shows would come as a valuable shock to those who rely solely on the mainstream media for their information. The portrayal of the war as a conspiracy against the American people is not inaccurate. As mentioned earlier, however, much goes unexplained. And what is left out weighs heavily against the movie.

In the process of describing the neoconservatives, not a single mention is made of the policies or policy-makers of the Democratic Party. Clinton administration policies in Iraq, its constant bombings and its embargo denying Iraqis the basic necessities of life, led to hundreds of thousands of deaths in Iraq. None of the people interviewed make any mention of the 1999 war against Serbia.

In 1997, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former national security adviser of President Jimmy Carter, wrote in his book *The Grand Chessboard* that it would be difficult to gain domestic support for the military excursions he was recommending into Central Asia, "except in conditions of a sudden threat or challenge to the public's sense of domestic well-being." Can we assume that this important parallel to the statement of the PNAC, written three years earlier, was excluded because Brzezinski is a Democrat?

Anyone watching this film would wait in vain for a single mention, much less a thorough analysis, of the October 2002 vote in Congress, in which a majority of Democrats, including serious contenders for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination, voted to give Bush the authority to invade Iraq. Congress passed the Patriot Act with hardly any debate and hardly any dissent. These facts must also be presented to the American public, and this is a glaring failure.

The filmmakers at least admit that there is more to these wars than simply oil. However, when they attempt to uncover the deeper roots of the new aggressive US policy, they fail. The various intellectuals interviewed on the subject of the new American empire are at times boring, repetitive and sometimes even odd. Zia Mian, professor of Science and Global Security at Princeton University, has this to say: "There's this strange notion that people think that the whole world, because we all live in the same time, it's 2003 for everybody, it will be 2004 for everybody, but that America has no territorial bounds but that actually time belongs to America." The movie features only short clips taken from various interviews, so it is not clear why this profound passage could not be edited out.

Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali speak rather superficially. They tell us that the invasion of Iraq was primarily meant as a message. Ali says, "The major reason to take Iraq was a display of imperial power ... To show ... who is master." Chomsky informs us, "The reasons for the extreme hostility and fear that quickly rose all over the world were not just the invasion of Iraq, but the fact that the invasion was understood to be an action taken to demonstrate that this program of global domination by force and the crushing of any potential challenge was meant extremely seriously."

The war, while enormously destructive, has been anything but a "cake-walk," and has failed to achieve stability. Watching the movie, however, one has no sense that an organized and growing insurgency has made Iraq ungovernable for the United States. Nothing of the corrupt no-bid contracts. Nothing of the insoluble divisions within the puppet regime. Nothing of Ahmed Chalabi or Iyad Allawi. In addition, no analysis is made of what type of government the US seeks to put in place in Iraq.

Some quite reactionary positions are put forward, directly in line with the 2004 Democratic Party campaign. For one, William Hartung of the World Policy Institute makes the argument that the war in Iraq has diverted US policy from the "real threat of terrorism." Osama bin Laden's connection to the CIA throughout the 1980s, as well as evidence of the US government's foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks, do not fit into the film. It is not clear, but from his comments it seems that Hartung may have supported the US invasion of Afghanistan.

Also, a particularly ugly sequence of the film attempts to portray Bush administration officials simply as "chicken-hawks." Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange tells us "This guy never fought a war." Mark Crispin Miller, author of *The Bush Dyslexicon*, fulminates against Bush in a patriotic and chauvinist way. "Bush was a draft dodger. Not only that, he was AWOL, in fact he was a deserter, because if it's longer than 30 days, you're a deserter. The guy was actually a deserter in wartime. If it had been Clinton, they would have just crucified him on the White House lawn." This is reminiscent of the attempt by Kerry's campaign to present its candidate as a soldier "reporting for duty." In fact, one who directly participated in a previous American war is not on that account any more fit to lead than one who did not.

At the same time, the film heaps praise on the Republican leadership for its ability to create the public image of George W. Bush. Michael Eric Dyson of the University of Pennsylvania says, "Republicans have ingeniously created the sense that this is about real men ... It's time for real men to step to the plate." Miller is also quite impressed. "Bush's propagandists have been masterful at crafting a certain image for him, actually based to some extent on his weaknesses ... He's just a normal guy, and when he messes up the language it proves he's just like you and me. It's quite brilliant to make Bush into a Jacksonian figure." Masterful, brilliant, ingenious. Thus is the incompetent and crisis-ridden Bush administration characterized.

It's highly likely that everyone featured in this documentary voted for the Democratic Party, or would have if they had a vote. Although this does not get mentioned in the film, Chomsky and Ali called for a vote for Kerry, who himself wholeheartedly supported the "war on terror," the Patriot Act, the invasion of two countries, cuts in taxes for the rich and cuts in social programs for the poor.

Ali still claims to be a socialist; in the 1960s and 1970s he led the International Marxist Group in Britain. Yet we do not hear a single mention, much less a clear analysis of class, capitalism or imperialism. While a few reviewers have compared this film favorably to *Fahrenheit 9/11* because of its "more serious tone," its shunning of all class issues in favor of a vague "Politics of Citizenship" causes it to leave out many of the most powerful insights into American society that could be seen in Michael Moore's film.

The eruption of US militarism threatens the stability of democratic rule within the United States itself. Vast changes have occurred and will continue to occur, affecting the political consciousness of millions of people. At such a time, what is required is honesty and a presentation of *all* the relevant facts. In that sense, despite the important information contained in this film, what was left out of *Hijacking Catastrophe* makes a great deal of difference.