

April 7, 2003

My Oscar "Backlash": "Stupid White Men" Back At #1, "Bowling" Breaks New Records

Dear friends,

It appears that the Bush administration will have succeeded in colonizing Iraq sometime in the next few days. This is a blunder of such magnitude -- and we will pay for it for years to come. It was not worth the life of one single American kid in uniform, let alone the thousands of Iraqis who have died, and my condolences and prayers go out to all of them.

So, where are all those weapons of mass destruction that were the pretense for this war? Ha! There is so much to say about all this, but I will save it for later.

What I am most concerned about right now is that all of you -- the majority of Americans who did not support this war in the first place -- not go silent or be intimidated by what will be touted as some great military victory. Now, more than ever, the voices of peace and truth must be heard. I have received a lot of mail from people who are feeling a profound sense of despair and believe that their voices have been drowned out by the drums and bombs of false patriotism. Some are afraid of retaliation at work or at school or in their neighborhoods because they have been vocal proponents of peace. They have been told over and over that it is not "appropriate" to protest once the country is at war, and that your only duty now is to "support the troops."

Can I share with you what it's been like for me since I used my time on the Oscar stage two weeks ago to speak out against Bush and this war? I hope that, in reading what I'm about to tell you, you'll feel a bit more emboldened to make your voice heard in whatever way or forum that is open to you.

When "Bowling for Columbine" was announced as the Oscar winner for Best Documentary at the Academy Awards, the audience rose to its feet. It was a great moment, one that I will always cherish. They were standing and cheering for a film that says we Americans are a uniquely violent people, using our massive stash of guns to kill each other and to use them against many countries around the world. They were applauding a film that shows George W. Bush using fictitious fears to frighten the public into giving him whatever he wants. And they were honoring a film that states the following:

The first Gulf War was an attempt to reinstall the dictator of Kuwait; Saddam Hussein was armed with weapons from the United States; and the American government is responsible for the deaths of a half-million children in Iraq over the past decade through its sanctions and bombing. That was the movie they were cheering, that was the movie they voted for, and so I decided that is what I should acknowledge in my speech.

And, thus, I said the following from the Oscar stage:

"On behalf of our producers Kathleen Glynn and Michael Donovan (from Canada), I would like to thank the Academy for this award. I have invited the other Documentary nominees on stage with me. They are here in solidarity because we like non-fiction. We like non-fiction because we live in fictitious times. We live in a time where fictitious election results give us a fictitious president. We are now fighting a war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or the fictitious 'Orange Alerts,' we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you. And, whenever you've got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up."

Halfway through my remarks, some in the audience started to cheer. That immediately set off a group of people in the balcony who started to boo. Then those supporting my remarks started to shout down the booers. The L.A. Times reported that the director of the show started screaming at the orchestra "Music! Music!" in order to cut me off, so the band dutifully struck up a tune and my time was up. (For more on why I said what I said, you can read the op-ed I wrote for the L.A. Times, plus other reaction from around the country at my website)

The next day -- and in the two weeks since -- the right-wing pundits and radio shock jocks have been calling for my head. So, has all this ruckus hurt me? Have they succeeded in "silencing" me?

Well, take a look at my Oscar "backlash":

-- On the day after I criticized Bush and the war at the Academy Awards, attendance at "Bowling for Columbine" in theaters around the country went up 110% (source: Daily Variety/BoxOfficeMojo.com). The following weekend, the box office gross was up a whopping 73% (Variety). It is now the longest-running consecutive commercial release in America, 26 weeks in a row and still thriving. The number of theaters showing the film since the Oscars has INCREASED, and it has now bested the previous box office record for a documentary by nearly 300%.

-- Yesterday (April 6), "Stupid White Men" shot back to #1 on the New York

Times bestseller list. This is my book's 50th week on the list, 8 of them at number one, and this marks its fourth return to the top position, something that virtually never happens.

-- In the week after the Oscars, my website was getting 10-20 million hits A DAY (one day we even got more hits than the White House!). The mail has been overwhelmingly positive and supportive (and the hate mail has been hilarious!).

-- In the two days following the Oscars, more people pre-ordered the video for "Bowling for Columbine" on Amazon.com than the video for the Oscar winner for Best Picture, "Chicago."

-- In the past week, I have obtained funding for my next documentary, and I have been offered a slot back on television to do an updated version of "TV Nation"/ "The Awful Truth."

I tell you all of this because I want to counteract a message that is told to us all the time -- that, if you take a chance to speak out politically, you will live to regret it. It will hurt you in some way, usually financially. You could lose your job. Others may not hire you. You will lose friends. And on and on and on.

Take the Dixie Chicks. I'm sure you've all heard by now that, because their lead singer mentioned how she was ashamed that Bush was from her home state of Texas, their record sales have "plummeted" and country stations are boycotting their music. The truth is that their sales are NOT down. This week, after all the attacks, their album is still at #1 on the Billboard country charts and, according to Entertainment Weekly, on the pop charts during all the brouhaha, they ROSE from #6 to #4. In the New York Times, Frank Rich reports that he tried to find a ticket to ANY of the Dixie Chicks' upcoming concerts but he couldn't because they were all sold out. (To read Rich's column from yesterday's Times, "Bowling for Kennebunkport," go here. He does a pretty good job of laying it all out and talks about my next film and the impact it could potentially have.) Their song, "Travelin' Soldier" (a beautiful anti-war ballad) was the most requested song on the internet last week. They have not been hurt at all -- but that is not what the media would have you believe. Why is that? Because there is nothing more important now than to keep the voices of dissent -- and those who would dare to ask a question -- SILENT. And what better way than to try and take a few well-known entertainers down with a pack of lies so that the average Joe or Jane gets the message loud and clear: "Wow, if they would do that to the Dixie Chicks or Michael Moore, what would they do to little ol' me?" In other words, shut the f--- up.

And that, my friends, is the real point of this film that I just got an Oscar for - - how those in charge use FEAR to manipulate the public into doing whatever they are told.

Well, the good news -- if there can be any good news this week -- is that not only have neither I nor others been silenced, we have been joined by millions of Americans who think the same way we do. Don't let the false patriots intimidate you by setting the agenda or the terms of the debate. Don't be defeated by polls that show 70% of the public in favor of the war. Remember that these Americans being polled are the same Americans whose kids (or neighbor's kids) have been sent over to Iraq. They are scared for the troops and they are being cowed into supporting a war they did not want -- and they want even less to see their friends, family, and neighbors come home dead. Everyone supports the troops returning home alive and all of us need to reach out and let their families know that.

Unfortunately, Bush and Co. are not through yet. This invasion and conquest will encourage them to do it again elsewhere. The real purpose of this war was to say to the rest of the world, "Don't Mess with Texas - If You Got What We Want, We're Coming to Get It!" This is not the time for the majority of us who believe in a peaceful America to be quiet. Make your voices heard. Despite what they have pulled off, it is still our country.

Yours,

Michael Moore