

**TEACHER GUIDE**

# Fahrenheit 9/11: Documentary or Propaganda?

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

*Fahrenheit 9/11* is a documentary film from director Michael Moore (*Roger and Me, Bowling for Columbine*) that opened in movie theatres around the world during the summer of 2004. It is a no-holds-barred attack on the Bush administration’s handling of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the War on Terror. The film was named Best Picture at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival and was the first documentary to lead the nation in ticket sales. It grossed over \$23 million in its first weekend and is the top moneymaking documentary of all time. The film was applauded by many on the left as a passionate critique of a dishonest, incompetent, and dangerous administration. Many on the right claim that Moore distorts facts, manipulates tragedy and spreads lies.

As students watch the trailer for the film, have them take notes on the messages that are communicated about President Bush. You may want to show this a few times through while students take notes.

> **Play** the trailer for the film (available at [www.fahrenheit911.com](http://www.fahrenheit911.com)).

Suggested Question for General Discussion:  
 What messages are communicated about President Bush?  
 Give your evidence from the trailer to back up your position.

Play the trailer again, stopping it at key points to decode its construction using the following guide.

> **Play** the first 20 seconds to “...out of this country.”

QUESTION	<b>What information is given about the U.S. Government and the Bin laden family in this segment?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	The government let Osama Bin Laden’s family leave the U.S. after September 11 even though all other air traffic was grounded.
EVIDENCE	Quote from Senator Bryon Dorgon stating “we had some airplanes authorized at the highest levels of our government to pick up Osama Bin Laden’s family members and transport them out of this country.” This comes immediately after a spokesperson



**Fahrenheit 9/11 Trailer**

**Video Clip**  
 2 min.

	from the Federal Aviation Agency states that all of the airports in the United States has been closed and all commercial airplane traffic was grounded.
QUESTION	<b>What is implied about President Bush in this segment? Describe how the film implies this.</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Bush protected Osama Bin Laden’s family.
EVIDENCE	George Bush’s name is flashed when Dorgan says “highest levels of government;” an Arab-looking man is shown behind a fence when Dorgan says “Osama Bin Laden’s family”

> **Play** the next 20 seconds to “...bad for the people.”

QUESTION	<b>What impression is given about the war in Iraq?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	The war is being driven by greedy business interests.
EVIDENCE	text on screen: “government is Secretive” and “corporations are greedy”; man at podium with foreign accent saying to business executives, “whatever it costs the government will pay you”; smiling man saying “its going to be good for business, bad for the people”
QUESTION	<b>What kind of music did Moore choose to accompany this segment and what does it communicate to you?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	The music is light and airy like the soundtrack for a fantasy. For many viewers it evokes a surreal feeling, suggesting that much about the war is an illusion. Chimes are used to emphasize the words “secretive” and “greedy.”

> **Play** the next 40 seconds to Michael Moore saying, “I would like to read you the U.S.A. Patriot Act.”

QUESTION	<b>What impression is given about the Patriot Act?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	It gives too much power to the government.
EVIDENCE	voice saying that it gives police “almost unlimited power”
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Politicians who signed the bill didn’t read it.
EVIDENCE	unnamed man telling us that the bill was “printed in the middle of the night” with images of the White House at night; Congressman Jim McDermott saying “no one read it”

> **Play** the final 50 seconds until the credits.

QUESTION	<b>What is communicated about President Bush in this last segment? How does the trailer communicate that?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Bush is beholden to the rich.
EVIDENCE	Bush speaking at a fancy dinner event telling the men in tuxedos “some people call you the elite, I call you my base”
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Bush is insincere and makes fun of serious issues.
EVIDENCE	Bush saying at the dinner “this is an impressive crowd, the haves and the have-mores” makes light of “the have-nots”; immediately after speaking about “these terrorist killers” Bush tells the camera to “watch this drive” as he golfs

**FURTHER QUESTIONS & ADDITIONAL INFO**

With the nation engaged in a “War on Terror,” do you think that Moore’s criticism of President Bush is appropriate or inappropriate? Patriotic or unpatriotic?

Many people have criticized *Fahrenheit 9/11* saying that it is not a true documentary and that it distorts facts to sway voters. A documentary film is defined as “a work such as a film or television program, presenting political, social or historical subject matter in a factual and informative manner and often consisting of actual news films or interviews accompanied by narration.” (dictionary.com) In what way does *Fahrenheit 9/11* appear to meet or not meet this definition? Is Moore’s “documentary” factual? In what ways does the documentary approach lend credibility (believability) to the film?

Propaganda is defined as “the systematic propagation of a doctrine or cause or of information reflecting the views and interests of those advocating such a doctrine or cause.” (dictionary.com) Is *Fahrenheit 9/11* propaganda? Are all political films propaganda?

Michael Moore was born in Flint, Michigan in 1954. He was a journalist and editor of the alternative biweekly newspaper, the *Flint Voice*, and the leftist political journal, *Mother Jones*. His first documentary, *Roger and Me*, was an attack on General Motors and its role in the economic collapse of Moore’s hometown. *Roger and Me* became one of the most financially successful documentaries up to that time. Moore’s 2002 film, *Bowling for Columbine*, was even more successful and won an Academy Award for Best Documentary.

Moore has pioneered original and often controversial approaches to political discourse. In his films he regularly harasses powerful businessmen and politicians, often putting them in compromising positions that paint them as insensitive or hypocritical. He uses powerful emotional content and imagery to make his points. And he uses humor to sway his audience. Some people see Moore as a political grandstander, a manipulator, and a propagandist. Others celebrate him as a courageous hero who gives voice to the underrepresented and the powerless.

During his 60-city “Slacker Uprising Tour” through 20 battleground states this fall Michael Moore promised to give a pack of underwear or a day’s supply of Ramen Noodles to first time voters who promised to go to the polls in November. On October 5, the Michigan Republican Party filed a criminal complaint against Moore, accusing him of trying to influence the election in violation of Michigan law.

What do you think of Moore’s approach to political activism?

Why might presidential candidate John Kerry have repeatedly insisted that he has no plans to view the film?

**CONNECTIONS**

There are a number of ways to connect this lesson to historical examples that involve a similar use of media in presidential election campaigns. In *Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns: A Document-Based History Kit*, these examples include:

In 2000, the Bush campaign aired a powerful commercial about our “Dangerous World” and the need for “a foreign policy with a touch of iron.”

The 1968 poster by independent artist David Nordhal (see right) critiqued President Lyndon Johnson’s role in the disastrous war in Vietnam.

The 1828 campaign song for John Quincy Adams tried to convince voters that Andrew Jackson’s presidency would lead to “Murder..., Martial and Lynch’s Law..., Slavery and knavery.” This lyrical attack portrayed Jackson as immoral, incompetent and a danger to the nation.

To view lesson plans for these documents as printable PDF files, go to the main page for the 2004 election lessons (<http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp.2004>). The documents themselves can be found in the kit; for information about ordering *Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns: A Document-Based History Kit*, go to [www.ithaca.edu/looksharp](http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp).



Bush “Dangerous World” TV Commercial



LBJ and Vietnam Poster

1828 doc. #4  
 LITTLE WAT YE WHA'S A-COMIN'  
 Words adapted from "Cincinnati Gazette", July 30, 1828  
 Melody: Traditional Scottish tune, "Highland Muster Roll"

Little wat ye wha's a-comin',  
 Little wat ye wha's a-comin',  
 Little wat ye wha's a-comin',  
 Murder an' gory ban's a-comin',  
 Fire's a-comin', swords a-comin',  
 Pistols, guns an' knives are comin',  
 Nero's comin', Hero's comin',  
 Forbye, the second section's comin'.

Little wat ye wha's a-comin',  
 Little wat ye wha's a-comin',  
 Little wat ye wha's a-comin',  
 Martial an' Lynch's Law are comin',  
 Slavery's comin', knavery's comin',  
 Plunder's comin', Blunder's comin',  
 Robbery's comin', Jobbing's comin'  
 An' a' the plague o' War's a-comin'.

Little wat ye wha's a-comin',  
 Little wat ye wha's a-comin',  
 Little wat ye wha's a-comin',  
 FUGGERS! IT's comin',  
 He'll fret and fume, he'll shoot and stab,  
 He'll stamp an' swear "like any drab,"  
 He'll play Jack Cade—hang honest men,  
 An' after that Calhoun's a-comin'.

“Little Wat Ye Wha's A-Comin'” Song