

Fear Factor

Bill Maher takes on *Bowling for Columbine's* Michael Moore on the issues of guns, politics, the media, and America's culture of fear



Michael Moore

Like many others who witnessed the tragic events of April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, Michael Moore felt a desperate need to take action. So he joined the National Rifle Association. Moore, who is infamous for his guerilla filmmaking tactics, didn't become a lifetime member of the organization that staged a pro-gun rally days after the nation's deadliest school shooting because he believed in its politics. He had more of a coup d'etat in mind.

*"The first thing I thought of doing was running against [NRA president Charlton] Heston," says Moore, who was also a NRA member when he was a Boy Scout growing up in Michigan. "I figured, 'Well, they've got four million members. Out of 280 million Americans, there have got to be five million who think like I do. I'll get them to pay the lowest basic membership, run against Heston, and defeat him. Then I'll dismantle this organization.' That was my original plan," he says, "but it was too much work." Instead, he revised his tactics and made his latest documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*, a witty, provocative, no-holds-barred look at the issue of gun violence in America.*

Predictably, Moore's controversial film has put him in the NRA's sights. After receiving a 13-minute standing ovation and a special award at the Cannes Film Festival, its Illinois branch petitioned the national chapter to revoke his membership. More surprising is some of the critical fire the filmmaker has drawn from the left end of the political spectrum who've accused him of drawing hazy political conclusions or taken exception with his direct, confrontational style.

*Moore makes no apologies for his arguments or the fashion in which he presents them. "I am willing to push it," he said in a recent interview. "I'll push it to a point where you're sitting there in the audience going 'I'm uncomfortable now.'" Moore uses every weapon in his arsenal to prod his audience into thinking and talking about his subject. By that measure, *Bowling for Columbine* is a remarkable success as it has quickly become one of the most discussed films of the year.*

*Like Moore, Bill Maher, former host of *Politically Incorrect*, is someone whose outspokenness has often provoked critical attacks. The pair sat down to chat about guns, politics, the media, and America's culture of fear at the film's premiere at the WGA Theater in October.*

Bill Maher: My first question, I guess, is a technical filmmaker's question. How many people do you have to interview just to leave us with the four or five really incredibly stupid ones? Because you couldn't write the dialogue that some of these people were saying.

Michael Moore: Not that many.

Maher: That's a sad comment. I thought you had to go through thousands.

Moore: No. Oftentimes it's just turning the camera on and not interrupting them. And of course the people from Michigan--I grew up amongst these people, so I know them quite well. I didn't think I had to venture too far, but I believe you could literally plop a camera down in any place in the United States and find the same radius of insanity within an hour of where you put the camera.

Maher: Your question really doesn't get answered throughout the movie, which is, "Why, if we have guns, like so many other places have guns, do we have this horrible problem?" Is it maybe that we are just stupider? That our people here are the stupidest in the world? And therefore when you put guns around, more of them are going to blow their dumb heads off. I'm serious about this question, Mike. I mean we are a pretty stupid country.

Moore: Our ignorance does not serve us well. If you were to ask most Americans to place Iraq on the map, I would say probably upwards to half of them couldn't. But we revel in this ignorance and then we do nothing to support educating our children. We don't support our schools. They're the last ones to get the money they need. All you have to do is keep the TV on every night and watch cable news or any of the local news, and I just think it makes your brain turn to mush. You're constantly bombarded with this stuff. In Southern California this summer it was the child abductions. Every night there was a new child abduction story. I mean it's a problem for those families who lose their children. It's a horrible problem and a horrible tragedy.

Maher: Right, but it's out of proportion.

Moore: Completely. Child abductions are down a third this year over what they were last year, and they were down last year from the year before. And people sit there in front of their TVs watching that five or six hours of television a day, just glued to this stuff and it puts them in this state of panic. We create this culture of fear and it feeds to all the wrong things. Ignorance leads to fear and fear leads to hate and hate leads to violence. And that's the equation.



Michael Moore talks with Mark Taylor a survivor of the Columbine High School shooting in *Bowling for Columbine*.

Maher: We seem to be unable to resist, on a mass level, manipulation of any sort. I always say the true axis of evil in America is the genius of our marketing combined with the stupidity of the people. They can sell you anything.

Moore: This film premiered in Cannes and we won the prize and then we showed it in Britain a couple of weeks ago and they're all over the moon with it. But not because they're laughing at Americans.

They believe they're becoming like that, that they're getting the stupid gene. If you turn on Channel 1 in France now, the news begins with, "Tonight, in a Paris suburb, a drive-by shooting." Plus their governments are snipping away at the social safety net that they've been used to. Now there are more poor people and there are more unemployed and more violence and more guns.



Michael Moore gets his hair cut at a barbershop where you can also buy bullets in *Bowling for Columbine*.

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Maher: It just seems like it's so easy for anyone in a position of power in this country to change the subject when it goes against them. Obviously, now we're seeing the subject change to Iraq. It's not a coincidence is it, that [the Republicans] were about to lose an election? The economy was the big issue a few months ago and corporate malfeasance. Then suddenly, "We have to get this guy [Saddam Hussein] because he gassed his own people in the 80s." Talk about a delayed reaction! Are we going to do anything about Wham! breaking up? I couldn't help thinking of that when you [were talking] about gun control. I mean they can go from guns to Marilyn Manson, or they can go from Bin Laden to Saddam Hussein, and everyone just seems to buy it. How do we get people to see through the bullshit?

Moore: Okay, I'm optimistic. I have a little more hope than that. Even today Bush is not able to get more than 46 percent of the public to support him in a unilateral war against Iraq. So the people haven't quite bought it yet, although he's doing his damndest. The best big lies work when there's a strong kernel of truth to the lie. The strong kernel of truth to this lie is that Saddam Hussein is a bad guy. This is a really, really bad guy. But as you said, he gassed the Kurds in '84. A year later, we reinstated full diplomatic relations with him. Then, according to the Senate report from 1994, it shows all these bio chemical elements that were shipped to him from the United States. These things were all given to him by us along with \$4 billion in aid. But I've got to tell you, I went on this tour this year with my book [*Stupid White Men*] to 47 cities, and I'm telling you, I saw this on the book tour-- thousands of people coming out. The economy was the issue. People have either lost their pension funds or they're going to lose it. In the 90s, middle America was convinced, invest in the stock market and you can be just like the rich guy. They put their meager savings into the stock market. It's all wiped out now. They are thoroughly pissed off. And these are the people who supported Republicans, who supported Bush, who supported corporate America. And corporate America has turned against them, more than the left or the liberals could ever hope. They did it to themselves. It's a perfect time for the Democrats to just give the Republicans a shellacking, and yet the Democrats are so lame that they could only put up 40 candidates out of 435 house races.

Maher: Remember Bob Dole's slogan in 1996, "Where's the outrage?"

Moore: Right. About what? We hadn't even found out about Clinton's penis yet. But it's true. Where is the outrage? Eight trillion dollars of wealth in two and a half years. That's a lot of money. They are outraged. But where do they direct their rage? They can't go to the polls on November 5th because there's no real choice on the ballot.

Maher: Let me ask you one more question about guns, since that's what this was about. Why, oh, why can't people who love guns admit that they just love guns? Why do they have to make it about freedom or the outdoors or the Constitution when it's plainly such bullshit? I mean the arguments that they use for guns, that we need to have guns to stave off an overpowering federal government, like we could stave off the Apache helicopter and the 30,000 nuclear weapons with our squirrel guns. Why can't they just admit it and say it's like booze or tobacco? It's a vice that's bad for you, but we like it. We like our guns. We play with them. We polish them. We just love them. Did you run into anyone who would have balls enough to say that?



Shelby is dressed for a reenactment of a news story in which two hunters strapped a rifle to a dog's back (the gun slipped and one of the hunters was shot) in *Bowling for Columbine*.

Moore: No. Nobody will say that.

Maher: They are so happy holding that gun. And when it fires, they're happier. And when it hits something they're the happiest.

Moore: You're right.

Maher: Charlton Heston says [in the film], "I've got guns in my house and they're all loaded." By the way, I think it's ironic. Charlton Heston recently was re-elected, I think it was to his fourth term [as NRA president]. Before that they had a ruling in the NRA that you could only serve two terms, but they liked him so much that they had an amendment. So it's interesting to know, Mr. Heston, that constitutions can change. The second amendment itself, I always used to point out on my show, is an amendment. It meant, "Ooh, let's rethink this."

Moore: That's right.

Maher: Why did you make this film? Was it from the shooting in Flint?

Moore: No, I got the idea to make the film after Columbine and thought I should do something. I wasn't going to go back to Flint in this movie and then that [shooting] happened and I couldn't ignore it. That was a very personal thing for me. At the end of my last documentary *The Big One*, I challenged [Nike CEO] Phil Knight to a foot race to put a factory in Flint but he wouldn't do it. So I said, "Give me \$10,000 for a school in Flint, and I'll put up \$10,000, and we'll do something for one of the poor schools there." He said, "Okay." So we took the \$20,000 and we built a computer lab at Buell Elementary. The kids were on their way to use our computers when this shooting took place.

Maher: You said this film started out as one journey, and halfway through, it became another, and you were happy it wound up on the road it did. What did you mean by that?

Moore: I set out to make a film about guns, but once into it, I realized that everybody knows we've got a gun problem. I wouldn't go to a movie if my wife said to me, "Hey, let's go to that gun control movie tonight." I want to make a movie that's going to challenge my assumptions. I want to make a movie that is going to be surprising and shocking and takes different twists and turns, all the reasons why we like to go to a good movie. The road we ended up on was looking at the why. Why are we such a violent people? Why do we want to kill first and ask questions later? How is our way of violence connected, whether it's locally or globally? I wanted to paint a picture of this country at the beginning of the 21st Century that was on a larger canvas than just, "Let's make a movie about guns" in the hopes that we would take a look at our ethic, our American ethos, the way we are. This is why I went to Canada. Growing up on the border there, I so admire them for how they've constructed their society. The Canadians, the Brits, the Irish, the Germans, the French, they all have this ethic that says, "We're all Canadians, we're all French. We're all in the same boat with each other, so we have a responsibility to help each other. If one of us gets sick, we have a responsibility to make sure that person has a doctor available."

Maher: We are not like that.

Moore: No. Winner take all, me, me, me. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. And let's beat up on the poor. Punish the poor for what? For being poor. That's a crime. I just got to thinking that we would have a more safe and less violent society if we wouldn't have this particular ethic and attitude, if we started treating each other in the way that we all responded to 9/11. We had a whole country open up their hearts and their pocket books. That's what's really great about Americans. Other people in other countries know that about us. As people, as individuals, we really are good people. But there's some sort of disconnect from how we as individuals behave and think and feel, and how we collectively decide things as a society, as a group of citizens.

Maher: We don't connect the dots.

Moore: That's right.

Maher: We hear that phrase all the time. The CIA didn't connect the dots. The FBI didn't connect the dots. I thought the most incredible part of this movie was when you traced that shooting of the six year-old in Flint. We see the mother getting on the bus, the two jobs, not being there, the kid having to move to another house. That's where he finds the gun. The mother isn't there. That's connecting the dots. The voters don't hear that when they put the negative ads up. This whole country is run by negative ads. You can make anyone think anything in a negative ad.

Moore: Bill, why doesn't the media do its job? Why don't they connect the dots? Why don't they ask the why?

Maher: Because they suck. After I saw the media lined up in your film, I wanted to get a gun.

Moore: Doesn't anyone say, "What is the guy in the ball cap with no college education doing asking these questions that the journalists and media should be asking?" There's something really embarrassing and disgusting about that, don't you think? I'm not the one that should be doing this.

Maher: Exactly.

Moore: If you go to your database in your computer, look up all the stories on Enron in the 90s. "Enron, genius corporation. Worldcom, the company of the 21st century." Story after story. Nobody would ask a single damn question. If you'd asked the questions, you would have known ten years ago that this was bullshit. "So how exactly do you trade energy futures?"

Maher: Right. And it's all a matter of public record.

Moore: I just want them to do their jobs.

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