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Now on DVD: The Passion of the Bush

You can run but you can't hide: Oct. 5 will bring the perfect storm in this year's culture wars. It's on that strategically chosen date, four Tuesdays before the election, that the DVD of "Fahrenheit 9/11" will be released along with not one but two new Michael Moore books. It's also the release date of the equally self-effacing Ann Coulter's latest rant, of a new DVD documentary, "Horns and Halos," that revisits the Bush mystery year of 1972, and of an R.E.M. album, "Around the Sun," that gets in its own political licks at the state of the nation.

When Dick Cheney and John Edwards debate in Cleveland that night, Bruce Springsteen will be barnstorming in another swing state, as the Vote for Change tour hits St. Paul. All that's needed to make the day complete is a smackdown between Kinky Friedman and Teresa Heinz Kerry on "Imus in the Morning."

Of the many cultural grenades being tossed that day, though, the one must-see is "George W. Bush: Faith in the White House," a DVD that is being specifically marketed in "head to head" partisan opposition to "Fahrenheit 9/11." This documentary first surfaced at the Republican convention in New York, where it was previewed in tandem with an invitation-only, no-press-allowed "Family, Faith and Freedom Rally," a Ralph Reed-Sam Brownback jamboree thrown by the Bush campaign for Christian conservatives. Though you can buy the DVD for \$14.95, its makers told the right-wing news service WorldNetDaily.com that they plan to distribute 300,000 copies to America's churches. And no wonder. This movie aspires to be "The Passion of the Bush," and it succeeds.

More than any other campaign artifact, it clarifies the hard-knuckles rationale of the president's vote-for-me-or-face-Armageddon re-election message. It transforms the president that the Democrats deride as a "fortunate son" of privilege into a prodigal son with the "moral clarity of an old-fashioned biblical prophet." Its Bush is not merely a sincere man of faith but God's essential and irreplaceable warrior on Earth. The stations of his cross are burnished into cinematic fable: the misspent youth, the hard drinking (a thirst that came from "a throat full of Texas dust"), the fateful 40th-birthday hangover in Colorado Springs, the walk on the beach with Billy Graham. A towheaded child actor bathed in the golden light of an off-camera halo re-enacts the young George comforting his mom after the death of his sister; it's a parable anticipating the future president's miraculous ability to comfort us all after 9/11. An older Bush impersonator is seen rebuffing a sexual come-on from a fellow Bush-Quayle campaign worker hovering by a Xerox machine in 1988; it's an effort to imbue our born-again savior with retroactive chastity. As for the actual president, he is shown with a flag for a backdrop in a split-screen tableau with Jesus. The message isn't subtle: they were separated at birth.

"Faith in the White House" purports to be the product of "independent research," uncoordinated with the Bush-Cheney campaign. But many of its talking heads are official or unofficial administration associates or sycophants. They include the evangelical leader and presidential confidant Ted Haggard (who is also one of Mel Gibson's most fervent P.R. men) and Deal Hudson, an adviser to the Bush-Cheney campaign until August, when he resigned following The National Catholic Reporter's investigation of accusations that he sexually harassed an 18-year-old Fordham student in the 1990's. As for the documentary's "research," a film positioning itself as a scrupulously factual "alternative" to "Fahrenheit 9/11" should not inflate Mr. Bush's early business "success" with Arbusto Energy (an outright bust for most of its investors) or the number of children he's had vaccinated in Iraq ("more than 22 million," the movie claims, in a country whose total population is 25 million).

"Will George W. Bush be allowed to finish the battle against the forces of evil that threaten our very existence?" Such is the portentous question posed at the film's conclusion by its narrator, the religious broadcaster Janet Parshall, beloved by some for her ecumenical generosity in inviting Jews for Jesus onto her radio show during the High Holidays. Anyone who stands in the way of Mr. Bush completing his godly battle, of course, is a heretic. Facts on the ground in Iraq don't matter. Rational arguments mustered in presidential debates don't matter. Logic of any kind is a nonstarter. The president - who after 9/11 called the war on terrorism a "crusade," until protests forced the White House to backpedal - is divine. He may not hear "voices" instructing him on policy, testifies Stephen Mansfield, the author of one of the movie's source texts, "The Faith of George W. Bush," but he does act on "promptings" from God. "I think we went into Iraq not so much because there were weapons of mass destruction," Mr. Mansfield has explained elsewhere, "but because Bush had concluded that Saddam Hussein was an evildoer" in the battle "between good and evil." So why didn't we go into those other countries in the axis of evil, North Korea or Iran? Never mind. To ask such questions is to be against God and "with the terrorists."

The propagandists of "Faith in the White House" argue, as others have, that the president's invocation of religion in the public sphere, from his citation of Jesus as his favorite "political philosopher" to his incessant invocation of the Almighty in talking about how everything is coming up roses in Iraq, is consistent with the civic spirituality practiced by his antecedents, from the founding fathers to Bill Clinton. It's not. Past presidents have rarely, if ever, claimed such godlike infallibility. Mr. Bush never admits to making a mistake; even his premature "Mission Accomplished" victory lap wasn't in error, as he recently told Bill O'Reilly. After all, if you believe "God wants me to be president" - a quote attributed to Mr. Bush by the Rev. Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention - it's a given that you are incapable of making mistakes. Those who say you have are by definition committing blasphemy. A God-appointed leader even has the power to rewrite His texts. Jim Wallis, the liberal evangelical author, has pointed out Mr. Bush's habit of rejiggering specific scriptural citations so that, say, the light shining into the darkness is no longer God's light but America's and, by inference, the president's own.

It's not just Mr. Bush's self-deification that separates him from the likes of Lincoln, however; it's his chosen fashion of Christianity. The president didn't revive

the word "crusade" idly in the fall of 2001. His view of faith as a Manichaeian scheme of blacks and whites to be acted out in a perpetual war against evil is synergistic with the violent poetics of the best-selling "Left Behind" novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins and Mel Gibson's cinematic bloodfest. The majority of Christian Americans may not agree with this apocalyptic worldview, but there's a big market for it. A Newsweek poll shows that 17 percent of Americans expect the world to end in their lifetime. To Karl Rove and company, that 17 percent is otherwise known as "the base."

The pandering to that base has become familiar in countless administration policies, starting with its antipathy to stem-cell research, abortion, condoms for H. I.V. prevention and gay civil rights. But ever since Mr. Bush's genuflection to Bob Jones University threatened to shoo away moderates in 2000, the Rove ruse is to try to keep the most militant and sectarian tactics of the Bush religious program under the radar. (Mr. Rove even tried to deny that the wooden lectern at the Republican convention was a pulpit embedded with a cross, as if a nation of eyewitnesses could all be mistaken.) The re-election juggernaut has not only rounded up the membership rosters of churches en masse but quietly mounted official Web sites like kerrywrongforcatholics.com as well. (Evangelicals and Mormons have their own Web variants on this same theme, but not the Jews, who are apparently getting in Kerry just what they deserve.) Even the contraband C-word is being revived out of sight of most of the press: Marc Racicot, the Bush-Cheney campaign chairman, lobbed a direct-mail fund-raising letter in March describing Mr. Bush as "leading a global crusade against terrorism."

In this spring's classic "South Park" parody, "The Passion of the Jew," in which Mr. Gibson's movie tosses the community into a religious war, one of the kids concludes: "If you want to be Christian, that's cool, but you should focus on what Jesus taught instead of how he got killed. Focusing on how he got killed is what people did in the Dark Ages, and it ends up with really bad results." He has a point. It's far from clear that Mr. Bush's eschatology and his religious vanity are leading to good results now. The all-seeing president who could pronounce Vladimir Putin saintly by looking into his "soul" is now refusing to acknowledge that the reverse may be true. The general in charge of tracking down Osama bin Laden, William G. Boykin, has earned cheers in some quarters for giving speeches at churches proclaiming that Mr. Bush is "in the White House because God put him there" to lead the "army of God" against "a guy named Satan." But all that preaching didn't get his day job done; he hasn't snared the guy named Osama he was supposed to bring back "dead or alive."

"George W. Bush: Faith in the White House" must be seen because it shows how someone like General Boykin can stay in his job even in failure and why Mr. Bush feels divinely entitled to keep his job even as we stand on the cusp of an abyss in Iraq. In this pious but not humble worldview, faith, or at least a certain brand of it, counts more than competence, and a biblical mission, or at least a simplistic, blunderbuss facsimile of one, counts more than the secular goal of waging an effective, focused battle against an enemy as elusive and cunning as terrorists. That no one in this documentary, including its hero, acknowledges any constitutional boundaries between church and state is hardly a surprise. To them, America is a "Christian nation," period, with no need even for the fig-leaf prefix of "Judeo-."

Far more startling is the inability of a president or his acolytes to acknowledge any boundary that might separate Mr. Bush's flawed actions battling "against the forces of evil" from the righteous dictates of God. What that level of hubris might bring in a second term is left to the imagination, and "Faith in the White House" gives the imagination room to run riot about what a 21st-century crusade might look like in the flesh. A documentary conceived as a rebuke to "Fahrenheit 9/11" is nothing if not its unintentional and considerably more nightmarish sequel.

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