

Michael Moore's 'Sicko' vs. the health insurance industry

July 14, 9:53 PM - Boston Liberal Examiner - Scott Gibbs



The amazing commercial success of Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11" (almost \$120 million in domestic box office, unheard of for a documentary) made many people, mainly the right-wing elites, very uncomfortable.

Until then, Michael Moore was easily dismissed as a rabble-rouser, a funny fat guy who liked to shake up the system a bit, but for the most part wasn't taken any more seriously than a Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert-type. He was an entertainer who happened to make people think while they were laughing, nothing more, and Moore was kept safely tucked away in his little far-left-loon box.

But then "Fahrenheit 9/11" came along and suddenly a lot of people were taking Michael Moore very, very seriously. On either side, whether you believed every frame of the film or whether you saw it as nothing more than a feature-length attack on everything Bush, people were talking. Yet the film, if box office numbers are the lead indicator of a movie's success, helped reel Michael Moore slightly away from the left-wing fringe and place him squarely on the doorstep of middle-America. And the results were polarizing, to say the least.

Following "Fahrenheit 9/11" the anti-Michael Moore brigade came out in full-force. This wasn't just another Moore film, he wasn't simply attacking easy targets anymore, such as the CEO of a giant corporation in "Roger & Me," or asking philosophical questions about America's violent culture and obsession with guns in "Bowling for Columbine," this time, with "Fahrenheit 9/11," he had the audacity to present an argument against the policies and motivations of a sitting president. This was seen as a treasonous act by most of right-wing America, and they took every chance to bash the filmmaker, calling him a communist, a phony, or worse. Many even tried to convince the public that somehow Michael Moore hated America.

Then came the 2007 film "Sicko," arguably Michael Moore's least political film to date. Moore spends very little time attacking any particular political party in "Sicko" (although he can't help himself from showing a particularly embarrassing Bush-ism at the very beginning of the movie). He instead dedicates almost the entire running time of the film to attacking America's broken healthcare system and presenting the health insurance industry as the root cause of its failures. If people manage to see this as a left-wing vs. right-wing argument then we need to seriously step back and analyze exactly what our political parties stand for. But I suppose because it's a Michael Moore film we are automatically inclined to view it in this way. If "Sicko" had been made by a complete unknown then surely any attacks from a political viewpoint would have been far less aggressive. "Sicko" is, after all, an attack on an industry that is clearly putting profits ahead of people's health. And the underlying question of "Sicko" appears to be whether this is something Americans would ever put up with if they were given the real truth about our class-divided system.

He interviews many former employees of the nation's biggest insurance and pharmaceutical companies and their testimonies are eye-opening and devastating. One woman breaks down into tears as she recalls having to tell people that their insurance wouldn't cover necessary medical procedures. Michael Moore, with a real talent for capturing a moment, provides ample footage of an immoral system.

Then he takes his cameras to Canada, England and France for a close-up view of the alternative, single-payer systems of these countries. And this is where the viewer needs to watch with a grain of salt. Yes,

obviously Michael Moore is an advocate for the single-payer system. Yes, obviously Moore is going to highlight the best these systems have to offer. But ask yourself this, if these single-payer, government-funded programs are so rotten to the core, as right-wing opponents will have us believe, then where is the outcry? When are these Canadians, Brits and French going to rise up against their governments and demand private insurance for all? My guess, never. Because the vast majority of these citizens are very content with their current systems. In fact, there are multiple quotes in the film by ordinary people that there would be an uproar if their governments ever tried to take away their socialized medicine. So it seems to make perfect sense for Mr. Moore to glorify the dedicated caregivers in these countries. After all, why not highlight the good these medical professionals provide in the absence of any insurance companies to deny them their obligation to treat people?

Now, and this is important, none of Michael Moore's attacks on the American healthcare system in the film is directed at hospitals, doctors, or nurses. At no time does Moore suggest that our system is failing because of the actual caregivers. This is an assault on America's health by corporate powers that, by their very definition, are instructed to turn a profit above all else. He clearly and shockingly shows us the levels private insurance companies will go in order to deny an individual healthcare. He shows us in blunt testimony by former employees that the company makes more when they are able to provide less. We see in stark terms that basic capitalism when applied to something like healthcare becomes an unethical, immoral monster.

And we now know, by a health insurance insider, the effect the popularity "Fahrenheit 9/11" had on the wealthy and powerful in America. Wendell Potter, a former Head of Corporate Communications for CIGNA, one of the biggest health insurance companies in America, has come forward on the PBS program Bill Moyer's Journal to discuss the secret plan by insurance companies to attack "Sicko" and Michael Moore, even before its release.

The "game plan" involved trashing foreign government-run healthcare at every opportunity, specifically highlighting the rare horror story of medical care gone wrong, and, more troubling, intimidating political figures by withholding campaign contributions to anyone who might endorse the film.

In a way this story disturbs by once again showcasing the power certain private corporations wield in our nation's capital. But also there is a bright spot: it shows that one man really can strike fear in the heart of the wealthy, powerful elite in America.

Whether you love Michael Moore or think he's the devil incarnate, you have to admit he deserves a tip of the cap for causing a mammoth industry like health insurance to quake, at least a little, in their boots. That, dear reader, is what makes America great.

To my point within collaboration of my pertinent nasty essays!

Don L. Johnson