

Michael Moore: Made over and moving on

By Bill Berkowitz

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On the evening of November 29, a made-over Michael Moore appeared on the Tonight Show. With a haircut, cleanly-shaved and dressed in a smart looking suit, dress shirt and striped tie, Moore had shed his familiar baseball cap, ill-fitting jeans and baggy jacket, and the unshaven, shaggy-haired look that has been his inimitable fashion statement and sartorial calling card for years.

Tonight show host, Jay Leno, stirred by the newly made over Moore, joked that the filmmaker looked like Denny Hastert, the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives. When Leno asked Moore if he had turned Republican, Moore responded, “If you can’t beat ‘em,” he said, “you might as well try to look like ‘em.”

According to a transcript of the program – recorded by the folks at Brent Bozell’s right wing media watchdog group, Media Research Center – Moore appeared to be in a pretty darn good mood, considering the outcome of the election. And considering that he has been taking a verbal pounding from right wing critics – as well as the folks over at the Democratic Leadership Council, an organization of so-called moderate Democrats – for contributing to Kerry’s loss. For many, Moore had become the new Ralph Nader.

The Media Research Center’s media monitor appeared fairly impressed by Moore’s demeanor, commenting that while the best-selling author “took some indirect shots at Bush...[he] couched them in some mildly amusing humor, such as how he’ll save on wedding gifts for his gay friends.” Also, unlike MSNBC’s Keith Olberman, who has been rigorously following the story of uncounted ballots in Ohio and elsewhere, MRC’s man was pleased to report that Moore “accepted the reality that ‘Bush got more votes.’”

The following exchange between Moore and Leno was transcribed by the MRC’s Brad Wilmoth:

Jay Leno: “Michael?”

Moore: made over and moving on / 2

Michael Moore: "It's me, Jay."

Leno: "I thought it was Denny Hastert, the Speaker of the House. Look at, this is a whole new look. You're not, are you a Republican now? What's going on?"

Moore: "I thought, I thought I should try to look a little sharper for my IRS audit."

Leno: "Oh, really, that's right, when you go in."

Moore: "Yeah. Actually, I just came from CBS. I was auditioning for the new anchor position."

Leno: "Oh really? Dan Rather's job."

Moore: "Well, I thought they'd probably want somebody less controversial and, you know, somebody without an agenda."

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Moore: "If you can't beat them, you might as well may try to look like them... And I started thinking, you know, a week or so after the election, you know, I need to start thinking about things that are really important, you know, like me. You know, and so I just, I actually made a list . . ."

Leno: "You have a list?"

Moore: "Yes, of the things that I think, you know, why it's gonna be good if Bush gets another four years now."

Leno: "All right. Well, this is certainly a change of heart, isn't it?"

Moore: "Well, I've had a pretty good year, you know, Fahrenheit 9/11, you know, and made a lot of money . . . [boos from audience] Yeah, but, you know, that Bush tax cut, I'm gonna get the money. How about that? . . . So I got that, and I started thinking, you know, I'm out there talking about 45 million Americans don't have health insurance. But, hey, you know, I got health insurance. Right? In fact, I got, I'm writers' union, in the directors' union. I got two plans. You probably got the same, right?"

Leno: "Same thing."

Moore: "So, you know, we're gonna do okay. We're gonna do okay. Jay and I are gonna do okay!"

Leno: "Don't get me in this somehow. But, yeah, all right, all right, so what else you got?"

Moore: "And gay marriage. Right? You know, you and I, we have gay friends, right?"

Leno: "Yeah, sure."

Moore: "Now, they can't get married. So you and I, we don't have to go and buy

Moore: made over and moving on / 3

all those salad bowls, you know, all those wedding gifts, you know.”

Leno: “Wedding gifts, sure.”

Moore: “We don’t have to worry about any of that, so there’s a lot of things to be thankful for here, and I don’t want people to be depressed because Bush has won, you know. There’s lots of good news – for me.”

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Leno: “So what happened? What do you think happened? What do you think?”

Moore: “I think Bush got more votes.” [audience cheers]

Leno: “Do you have any theories on why the Democrats lost?”

Moore: “I think that the, I think the people don’t want to change Presidents during a time of war. We’ve never done that. People were afraid, we were attacked, you know, he promised that he would – you know, the Republicans, I’ll give them this, they had a story to tell, and the Democrats oftentimes aren’t very good at telling a story. But the Republicans tell really good stories. And his story was very powerful.”

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Moore: “I think he’s very good at telling that story, and the story was, ‘Out of the ashes of September 11th rose one man, and he stood on the rubble of lower Manhattan with a bullhorn, and he said, “I will protect you.” And he did. And we were never attacked again.’ [light applause]

“And that’s a powerful story to tell. It has nothing to do as to whether or not we will be attacked again or whether we’re really safer now as a result of his actions. But when you ask people, ‘Now, tell me the Democrats’ story. What was the thing they were trying to tell the American people? And you start to flummox all around trying to figure out what exactly, you know, was that. But, look, it was a very close election. It was the closest margin of victory of any sitting president since Woodrow Wilson won in 1916. It’s just a couple of percentage points. People who voted for Kerry shouldn’t be depressed at this point, to pick themselves up, it was very close. It’s like you made it to the three-yard line, there’s another game in four years, and we’ll come back and do the best we can.”

Whining New/Old Democrats

“We’ve got to repudiate, you know, the most strident and insulting anti-American voices out there sometimes on our party’s left ... We can’t have our party identified by Michael Moore and Hollywood as our cultural values.” – Al From, CEO, Democratic Leadership Council

“You know, let’s let Hollywood and the Cannes Film Festival fawn all over

Moore: made over and moving on / 4

Michael Moore. We ought to make it pretty clear that he sure doesn't speak for us when it comes to standing up for our country. – Will Marshall, president of the Progressive Policy Institute, the think tank of the DLC

The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), which claims to be “new” Democrats with feet firmly planted on centrist political territory, has been taking some major league pot shots at Moore. They have been joined in the effort to discredit Moore by a gaggle of right wing pundits, columnists and talking heads. Both groups seem to be invested in the red state/blue state analyses haunting the post-election mediascape.

Founded after the Dukakis debacle of 1988, the DLC has always intended to move the party away from the left and towards the center. These days, with the center being so far to the right, it's fair to say that the DLC would make a perfectly adequate European right wing political organization.

Ralph Nader once branded the DLC “corporatist” and “soulless.” And, in a July 2003 piece titled “The Democratic Weaselship Council” Salon's Joan Walsh asked rather incredulously “Has Karl Rove taken over the Democratic Leadership Council?”

Both the DLC and Moore's right wing critics have found common ground: Moore is an affront to America's “values voters,” cavorts too intimately with the Hollywood elite, and no amount of Moore makeovers can save the Party.

Since the election, Democratic former Rep. Leon Panetta, who also served as President Clinton's White House chief of staff, has said that the Democratic Party must do away with cultural elitism – which he called the “Michael Moore syndrome.”

“Hollywood has its place in politics,” Panetta said, “but a lot of people felt that Michael Moore and ‘Fahrenheit 9/11’ didn't speak for them. There was a sense that he was making fun of their values and exploiting them.”

In a recent New York Post column, Peter Beinart, the editor of The New Republic, suggested that the Democratic Party must engage in a “sustained battle to wrest the party from leaders like Michael Moore and MoveOn.”

“The Democratic Party is at a crossroads, writes columnist David Limbaugh in a recent WorldNetDaily column. “It needs to decide whether it wants to continue to marginalize itself as the party of Michael Moore, or be a constructive force in the future of American politics and governance.”

As we approach Award season, another skirmish in America's ongoing culture wars is about to ensue: Which of America's culture-shaking 2004 films – Mel Gibson's “The Passion of the Christ,” or Moore's “Fahrenheit 9/11” – will win more honors and recognition?

Meanwhile, on Saturday December 4, Moore – who's first name now appears to

Moore: made over and moving on / 5

be “controversial” – as in “the controversial Michael Moore” – appeared before a sold-out screening of “Fahrenheit 9/11” at the Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center, in San Rafael, California and delivered an upbeat message, telling the audience not to “despair” but to “redouble our efforts.”

No matter how many trips to the barbershop or the clothing store Moore might make, there’s little hope he’ll mend fences with his critics. I’m pretty confident that the next film we get from Moore will be a hard-hitting critique of the present regime and its agenda. While you’re waiting, check out Moore’s latest book, “Will They Ever Trust Us Again? Letters from the War Zone.”