

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Idiocracy*]

The Morons Shall Inherit the Earth

By Steve Sailer

PERHAPS THE MOST GIFTED populist conservative in the entertainment industry is Mike Judge, creator of the TV animated comedies “Beavis & Butt-Head” and “King of the Hill” (now scheduled for an 11th season on Fox in 2007), as well as the 1999 cult classic film “Office Space.”

Despite Judge’s commercial consistency, his clever and frequently hilarious new satire “Idiocracy” has been deep-sixed by his own studio, Rupert Murdoch’s 20th Century Fox, with the most passive-aggressive release of any film in memory. Over the Labor Day weekend “Idiocracy” materialized in 130 theatres in seven cities (but not in New York, so national media coverage was nonexistent) bereft of even a trailer or the smallest newspaper ad. Fox couldn’t even be bothered to tell Moviefone the name of the film—you had to search for it under “New Mike Judge Comedy.”

Judge, who worked for years as an engineer at the kind of manhood-crushing cubicle jobs parodied in “Office Space,” is an intensely intelligent paleo-conservative observer of red-state life and its degradation by liberal social mores and commercial vulgarization.

His recurrent themes are masculinity, class, IQ, and character. His hero Hank Hill of “King of the Hill” is the most admirable sitcom father since “The Cosby Show” and likely the white TV dad most worthy of respect since the 1950s. Although a man of no more than average intelligence, Hank diligently subscribes to the traditional American manly virtues.

“Idiocracy” is an updating of C.M. Kornbluth’s famous 1951 science fiction story about dysgenic breeding, “The Marching Morons.” It opens with a yuppie husband and wife on the left half of the screen (IQs of 138 and 141 respectively) endlessly debating the perfect moment to conceive their one child: “We just can’t have a child in *this* market.” Meanwhile, on the right side, Clevon is impregnating every woman in the trailer park.

Unambitious Private Joe Bauers (Luke Wilson) is another of Judge’s average-man heroes. Because he scored at the median of every bell curve from IQ to blood pressure, Bauers is drafted for a military “human hibernation” experiment, an idea presumably lifted from Robert Heinlein’s *The Door Into Summer*, in which the Army keeps a few divisions on ice in case of war. Due to a scandal, the private is forgotten and awakes in 500 years. To his horror, he discovers that after 20 generations everyone is a Clevon, and he’s now the smartest man in America.

As he showed in “Beavis & Butt-Head,” Judge has a genius for stupidity. The visual details of a Washington, D.C. populated solely by morons are memorable: a collapsing skyscraper is held together by wrapping it with oversized twine; the White House has broken cars

up on blocks on the dying lawn and the “President of America” is a professional wrestler; and at “St. God’s Hospital” the illiterate admitting nurse is equipped with a fast-food-style touch-screen menu with diagrams of common ailments, such as a stick-figure man with a knife stuck in his head. All clothing is plastered with corporate logos and the secretary of state is paid to insert the phrase “brought to you by Carl’s Jr.” into everything he says.

Although we like to think of the unintelligent as sweet Forrest Gumps, in Judge’s dystopia everyone is a surly jerk to Private Bauers because he speaks in complete sentences, which the denizens of the 26th century find “faggy.”

“Idiocracy” isn’t perfect. At only 84 minutes, it looks like it was hacked up in editing. A narrator very slowly explains natural selection and too many of the jokes.

Did Fox murder this film’s release as part of a complex metamarketing plot to turn it into a DVD hit? Did the corporations satirized in it threaten to pull advertising from the Fox Network? Or did Fox executives not realize until after Judge had delivered his movie in 2004 that he’d lifted his basic idea from *The Bell Curve* and that You Just Can’t Say That anymore?

That the poor have more children than the rich has been observed at least since Adam Smith in 1776. The long-term effect is much less clear. Yet can’t an artist be allowed to explore the comic possibilities of a logic we’ve all privately thought about? Isn’t this the land of the free and the home of the brave? I guess not. ■

Rated R for language and sex-related humor.

BOOKS

[*War by Other Means: An Insider's Account of the War on Terror*, John Yoo, Atlantic Monthly Press, 224 pages]

He Wrote the Book on Torture

By James Bovard

GEORGE W. BUSH has made absolutism respectable among American conservatives. And no one has done more pimping for president-as-Supreme-Leader than John Yoo, the former Justice Department official who helped create the “commander-in-chief override” doctrine, unleashing presidents from the confines of the law. At a time when Bush is pushing Congress to approve the use in military tribunals of confessions that resulted from torture, it is vital to understand the thinking of the Bush administration’s most visible advocate of “coercive interrogation.”

Yoo’s new book, *War by Other Means: An Insider's Account of the War on Terror*, reads like a slippery lawyer’s brief submitted to a dim judge who gets all his information from Fox News. Though Yoo’s misrepresentations and omissions should provoke outrage, his book will likely receive accolades from many conservative reviewers. This new volume compliments Yoo’s first book, *The Powers of War and Peace*, which revealed that the Founding Fathers intended to permit presidents to start wars on their own whims, regardless of what the Constitution says.

Perhaps Yoo’s authoritarian tendencies resulted from his time at Harvard, where empowering an elite is always in fashion. Yoo paints every proposal for limiting the president’s power as a dangerous novelty. He is always trying to

shift the burden of proof onto anyone who thinks the president should not be a czar.

He scoffs at critics of the phrase “war on terror” while admitting “the United States is not at war with every terrorist group in the world, or all who employ terrorist tactics, or a social problem, but with Al Qaeda.” Yet top administration officials were laying plans to invade Iraq within days after the Twin Towers collapsed. Two weeks after 9/11, Yoo, in a memo to the White House, claimed that the attacks gave the U.S. government carte blanche for war anywhere in the world. Yoo suggested that “an American attack in South America or Southeast Asia might be a surprise to the terrorists,” since they were expecting the U.S. to target Afghanistan. Yoo assured the White House that “the President’s broad constitutional power ... would allow the President to [take] whatever actions he deems appropriate to pre-empt or respond to terrorist threats from new quarters.” Yoo’s assurances may have inspired Bush’s declaration a few weeks later that “So long as anybody’s terrorizing established governments, there needs to be a war.”

Yoo wrote a Torturers’ Emancipation Proclamation memo while serving as deputy assistant attorney general. He informed the White House in August 2002 that it could scorn federal law because “the President enjoys complete discretion in the exercise of his Commander-in-Chief authority and in conducting operations against hostile forces ... we will not read a criminal statute as infringing on the President’s ultimate authority in these areas.” Thus, the “commander-in-chief” title automatically swallows up the rest of the Constitution.

Yoo’s memo began by largely redefining torture out of existence. It then explained that even if someone died during torture, the torturer might not be guilty if he felt the torture was necessary to prevent some worse evil. Yoo preemptively exonerated any U.S. torturer: “If a government defendant were to harm an enemy combatant during an

interrogation in a manner that might arguably violate [the Anti-Torture Act], he would be doing so in order to prevent further attacks on the United States by the al Qaeda terrorist network.” Yoo never explained why preventing a catastrophic attack is the only reason why a suspect might be maimed during interrogation.

War by Other Means endlessly refers to Abu Ghraib as if that were the alpha and omega of the torture scandal. In reality, the photos in late April 2004 were not even the tip of the iceberg. U.S. government agents have inflicted abuses ranging from the endless high-volume repetition of a “Meow Mix” cat food commercial at Guantanamo to tearing out toenails in Afghanistan, from compulsory enemas for recalcitrant prisoners to beating people to death in Iraq and kicking them to death outside Kabul, from illegally sending detainees to foreign governments to be tortured by proxy to creating a system of “ghost prisoners” worthy of a banana republic.

Yet Yoo implies that the torture scandal may be largely a liberal media concoction. After citing *The New Yorker’s* Seymour Hersh, Yoo says, “Articles have appeared claiming abuses at Guantanamo such as long-term isolation, stress positions, and exposure to extreme heat or cold or noise. At this writing we cannot know if such reports are false, or isolated examples. They are currently unverified and the subject of continuing investigations.”

Unverified—except for a deluge of e-mails from FBI agents who visited Gitmo and were horrified by what they saw. An FBI agent reported on Dec. 5, 2003 that the “torture techniques” used at Gitmo have “produced no intelligence of a threat neutralization nature.” One FBI agent complained about a female U.S. military interrogator who yanked back a shackled prisoner’s thumbs and grabbed his genitals. Another FBI agent e-mailed bureau headquarters on Aug. 2, 2004 after seeing detainees “chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water. Most times they had urinated or defecated on