

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*V for Vendetta*]

Did I Shave My Head for This?

By Steve Sailer

A FILM CRITIC would have to hate George W. Bush awfully bad to praise the ludicrous yet humorless “V for Vendetta,” in which a disguised superhero blows up the Houses of Parliament to overthrow the clerico-fascist despotism ruling Britain in 2020. Yet a majority of movie reviewers have given their thumbs-up to “V for Vendetta,” even though it is just another masochist’s fantasy masquerading as a profound political allegory from the Wachowski siblings, the *frauteurs* who were to blame for the “Matrix” trilogy.

“V for Vendetta” started out in the 1980s as a “graphic novel”—an expensive, pretentious comic book—by Alan Moore (*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) about how Margaret Thatcher would turn England into a totalitarian dystopia by 1997. Well, that didn’t exactly happen, so now the Wachowskis have rewritten it as a post-9/11 fable implying that President Chimp McHitler Bushton will crush all dissent Real Soon Now. Personally, I’d rather endure a Bush press conference than see this movie again.

Remember director Ridley Scott’s famous “1984” Super Bowl commercial introducing the Apple Macintosh? Now, imagine that 45-second spot dragged out over 132 minutes. In “V for Vendetta,” the Big Brother tyrant ranting about

unity and security from a vast video screen is played by John Hurt. An ambitious, deeply religious Conservative politician, he had imposed martial law in the wake of a terrorist virus attack, putting society under the thumb of fanatical Church of England bishops. (According to Google, the phrase “fanatical Church of England bishops” has never been seen before.) The government dispatched all Muslims and homosexuals to concentration camps, although the film forgets to mention how these two victimized minorities got along on the inside.

Fortunately, V, a masked mutant survivor of a government biological warfare experiment (Hugo Weaving, Agent Smith from “The Matrix”), has risen up to challenge the clampdown all by his lonesome. In his underground redoubt, he broods surrounded by banned artworks he has liberated from the vaults of the Ministry of Objectionable Material, such as Jan Van Eyck’s immortal “Arnolfini Wedding Portrait” of 1434. You might be asking: why would a reactionary Christian government ban the masterpieces of the pious past? Simple, according to the Wachowskis: because conservatives hate art.

V’s reluctant accomplice is portrayed by Natalie Portman. Best known as Queen-Senator Padmé in the recent “Star Wars” whoop-tee-doo, Portman is a graduate of the George Lucas Academy of Dramatic Arts, and it shows. A smart, pleasant young lady offscreen who sadly lacks all charisma onscreen, she ought to go do something else with her life.

Stephen Rea portrays the hangdog Scotland Yard inspector assigned to catch V. But he discovers—prepare to expire of astonishment—that the fascist regime itself actually inflicted the “terrorist” virus epidemic! You can tell that

Rea’s character will turn out to be on the side of good because he’s half-Irish, unlike all those racially reprehensible English Nazis shouting the government’s slogan “England prevails!” Eight hundred years of successful English resistance of tyranny don’t count for much in the movies because Anglophobia is one prejudice of which today’s Hollywood approves.

Although advertised as an action film, “V for Vendetta” consists of two hours of speechifying with a big explosion at the end. It’s like “My Dinner with Andre on the Hindenburg.”

Still, all that political posturing is mostly for show. Just as the “Matrix” movies were less about philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra than about Carrie-Anne Moss dressing up in black leather and hurting men, the fetishistic point of this film is to imprison, torture, degrade, and shave the beautiful hair off of poor little Natalie Portman’s head.

You may have noticed that the silly but well-made 1999 “Matrix” credited “The Wachowski Brothers,” while its dire 2003 sequels referred to “The Wachowskis.” In 1999, Larry, the elder Wachowski, was living a normal life as a married man, so he had to sublimate his latent perversity into his art. Unfortunately, that blockbuster afforded him the money to transform his inner kinks into grotesque reality. He left his wife and moved in with a dominatrix called Ilsa Strix. Soon he was dressing as a woman, and rumors circulated that Larry planned to become a Wachowski sister. Unsurprisingly, the level of imagination in his movies collapsed.

Now, they are at least back to a “Wachowski Brothers” credit, but their films have yet to recover. ■

Rated R for strong violence and some language.

BOOKS

[*America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power and the Neoconservative Legacy*, Francis Fukuyama, Yale University Press, 240 pages]

Fukuyama at the Crossroads

By Christopher Preble

IN JANUARY 1998, the Project for a New American Century issued the first of several statements calling for the removal of “Saddam Hussein and his regime from power.” Just over five years later, the signers of PNAC’s statements got their wish when the United States launched a war to liberate Iraq. It would seem to be a time for celebration, yet one of them is having second thoughts. In *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power and the Neoconservative Legacy*, Francis Fukuyama, a signatory not only to three PNAC statements on Iraq but also to the organization’s statement of principles, explains his intellectual journey from neoconservative true believer to skeptic. The Iraq War is at the center of this conversion. “It seems very doubtful,” writes Fukuyama, “that history will judge the Iraq war kindly.”

As a respected scholar of international relations and the author of the influential book *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama was capable of articulating either a defense or a critique of the impending war with Iraq. “Unlike many other neoconservatives,” he now explains in the new book, “I was never persuaded of the rationale for the Iraq war.” In the year prior to the invasion, Fukuyama studied the problem and concluded that “the war did not make sense.”

To the extent that Fukuyama feels at all guilty for not going public with his private misgivings, this book is an effort to set things right. His “attempt to eluci-

date the neoconservative legacy” and to explore the evolution of the philosophy into something that he can no longer support is a worthwhile and enjoyable read. But while the press is sure to focus on the fact that a member of the neoconservative inner circle has now turned on his former ideological allies, this important and insightful book is much more than a tell-all memoir of self-discovery. Fukuyama demolishes some of the central tenets of neoconservatism that led to the debacle in Iraq, but he also sets forth an alternative vision, one that he sees as both more consistent with American values and more likely to succeed in an international environment deeply skeptical of American power.

A number of his specific recommendations are commendable, including his call for “a dramatic demilitarization of American foreign policy and reemphasis on other types of policy instruments”; the establishment of “clear criteria for when we believe preventive war is legitimate”; and an end to the “rhetoric about World War IV and the global war on terrorism.”

Beyond these specifics, the book is useful in its exploration of the elements of neoconservative thought that led to the Iraq fiasco. Unlike those who see democracy-promotion and regime change as core elements of neoconservatism, Fukuyama sees Iraq as inconsistent with the philosophy espoused by the likes of Leo Strauss and Irving Kristol and therefore emblematic of the “wrong turn” taken by some neoconservatives during the 1990s.

Fukuyama traces this wrong turn to the unexpected collapse of communism, which some took as a validation of the concept of regime change. Drawing on his nuanced understanding of the unique circumstances surrounding the democratization that took place in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Fukuyama dismantles the facile notion “that democracy was a default condition to which societies would revert once liberated from dictators.”

Liberal democracy, Fukuyama explains, is a byproduct of the process of modernization documented in his ear-

lier book *The End of History*. To the extent that liberalism “becomes a universal aspiration,” the process takes time. Crucial institutions “must be in place before a society can move from an amorphous longing for freedom to a well-functioning, consolidated political system with a modern economy.” He warns, the “democratic contagion can take a society only so far; if certain structural conditions are not met, instability and setbacks are in store.”

Some neoconservatives routinely dismiss the notion that democracy can give rise to an illiberal political order, or, worse, that the spread of democracy could pose a threat to the United States. The suggestion seemed to be a practical impossibility, akin to the sun rising in the west. But in a classified report from February 2003, the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research expressed doubts that the installation of a new regime in Iraq would foster the spread of democracy in the Middle East and warned that “even if some version of democracy took root ... anti-American sentiment is so pervasive that Iraqi elections in the short term could lead to the rise of Islamic-controlled governments hostile to the United States.”

Fukuyama taps this vein. “While there is nothing wrong,” he explains, “with being hopeful and open to the possibility of miracles” such as occurred in 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet empire, “it is another thing altogether to predicate a foreign policy on the *likelihood* of multiple near-term democratic transitions.” And yet that is precisely what his former fellow travelers have done.

Fukuyama is also effective in revealing the illogic of preventive war more broadly. He correctly notes that preventive war has always been seen as “problematic” because “it depends on being able to accurately predict the future,” especially its assumption that an extant threat will become imminent. “Preventive war cannot be ruled out as a component of an American grand strategy. But making it a central feature entails large risks and costs that are all too evident in retrospect.”