CASUS BELLI Thick smoke billows into the sky beyond the Statue of Liberty following the destruction of the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001. *Below*, an issue of *Yank*, the U.S. Army newspaper, from June 17, 1942.

THROUGH A LENS, DARKLY

By taking the gloves off the documentary, Michael Moore opened the door for such gut-punching movies as *Why We Fight*–which exposes the military-industrial complex's reign of fear and post-9/11 coup d'état–and *The Unrecovered*, a piercing of the veil that enshrouds the World Trade Center attack

Every documentarian with integrity to spare should enshrine a Buddha statue of Michael Moore in the editing room, next to the coffee machine. It doesn't matter whether the filmmaker is a fan of Moore's or considers him a meatball sandwich—homage should be paid. Without Moore's brazen effrontery, documentaries might still be poor cousins camped on the stoop, ringing the buzzer and being ignored. He's elevated everybody's visibility and expanded the playing field, making it possible for movies as disparate in tone and subject as *Super Size Me, Control Room, Bush's Brain,* and *Grizzly Man* to attract audiences that otherwise might have stayed home and let their hair go gray. It's not that interesting, provocative docs weren't being made before Moore shambled onto the scene with *Roger & Me* (1989), holding the microphone like an ice-cream cone as he bird-dogged the chairman of General Motors, Roger Smith. It's that they didn't seem to matter. After the glory run of *Gimme Shelter, The Sorrow and the Pity, Harlan County U.S.A.,* and Frederick Wiseman (*High School, Hospital*) in the late 60s and the 70s, the documentary genre receded into a prolonged malaise, a diminished status. Like the literary novella or repertory theater, the documentary form seemed a cultural holdover, unplugged from anything urgent. Going to a documentary felt like an educational chore—a force-feeding for our own good. As Pauline Kael wrote in *Deeper into Movies,* "Many of us grow to hate documentaries in school, because the use of movies to teach us something seems a cheat—a pill disguised as candy—and documentaries always seem to be about something we're not interested in."

We might be still digesting our yawns had *Roger & Me* been a fluke, a novelty item. (For the record, Kael detested it, ac-

LARGE PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL HULSHIZER

cusing Moore of cinematic chicanery.) But the ballistic impact of *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* served notice that there was a method to Moore's madcap approach, a larger ambition. Moore's movies made news not only because he had a Colonel Tom Parker knack for larger-than-life promotion ("Call it first-person polemic, or expressionist bulletin board, or theatricalized Op-Ed piece" is how film essayist Geoffrey O'Brien described Moore's brassy approach), but also because each succeeding film drilled deeper into the corporate-political-media dementia we take for granted. He matured beyond the gadfly antics of *Roger & Me,* ascending the slopes of Lower Slobovia and elevating his gunsights to mount a multi-track attack on institutional power, propaganda, and the destruction of civic bonds in this new Hobbesian landscape. More important, Moore found his signature theme.

Fear.

Fear is the animating force in *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11,* the juice that powers the political grid. Both films analyze and illustrate how fear is fed into our diet of news and entertainment, climate-controlled, manipulated for political advantage, fermented into paranoia, and vented through small- and large-scale lashings of violence. The shooting spree in the high-school cafeteria and the bombing of distant palm-treed villages are products of the same manufactured pathology. Fear has militarized the American mind, set up occupation, made the country literally and figuratively gun-crazy. We've become prisoners of our fortress mentality, some of us passive receptors for scare talk and terror alerts, others trying to tunnel their way out to the truth. This fortress mentality keeping us passive and squirrelly is outlined and demarcated in the new documentary *Why We Fight,* while the unclassifiable *The Unrecovered* (which deploys documentary footage) digs underground.

Why We Fight, directed by Eugene Jarecki, who previously put America's mumbling Metternich in the dock in *The Trials of Henry Kissinger* (based on the indictment drawn up by *Vanity Fair*'s Christopher Hitchens), takes its title from the series of propaganda shorts directed by Hollywood's top populist filmmaker, Frank Capra (*Meet John Doe, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town,* etc.), to mobilize homeland support during World War II. Punctuated with shots of grinning, jaw-jutting G.I.'s, Capra's *Why We Fight* offered an armory of assertions: We fight for peace, democracy, and "the most expensive luxury known to man," liberty. The question posed by Jarecki's *Why We Fight* is why we *keep* fighting. The U.S. is the planet's sole remaining superpower, unrivaled in military reach and might, and yet our leaders have us leaping at every mouse. For more than a half-century, America's been a muscle-bound, world-straddling fraidy-cat. After victory in Europe and the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, the U.S.A. stood tall, proud, and handsome. "We were the only unwrecked major power," observes Gore Vidal in *Why We Fight.* Unlike Russia, Europe, Japan, and China, our cities hadn't been bombed or incinerated, our countryside turned into refugee camps and mass graves; our farms and booming factories were untouched, our sense of national identity fortified. The collective exhalation of relief and jubilation following Fascism's defeat didn't last. The late 40s and the 50s saw the emergence of the national-security state under President Truman, the Cold War, the feverish excesses of the McCarthy era, and the hip-fusion of military and business interests to produce bigger, costlier, and more destructive weapons. The country was kept on permanent war footing and in a constant state of jitters.

The key scripture in *Why We Fight* is President Eisenhower's prophetic warning in his 1961 farewell address about the menace of what he termed the "military-industrial complex." As the former supreme Allied commander in Europe, Eisenhower knew better than anyone how pet military programs metastasized into expensive pork projects for weapons that didn't work, bases that weren't needed, planes that were outmoded before their wheels left the runway. The procurement process became such a self-perpetuating byzantine bureaucratic maze that even Ike had to scratch his bald head in baffled frustration. (He was once heard to lament, "God help this country when somebody sits at this desk who doesn't know as much about the military as I do.") Whenever popular support for military bulking-up flagged, a fear injection was administered with a jab. To justify the spiraling extravagance of the defense budget, politicians and defense lobbyists exploited Americans' sense of anxiety and vulnerability—from J.F.K.'s "missile gap" to Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" initiative to Bush's "Axis of Evil." Similarly, America always found an excuse to meddle elsewhere, regardless of whose trousers occupied the chair in the Oval Office. As Wilfrid Sheed mused in an essay about Eisenhower, "Kennedy supporters . . . blamed Ike for bequeathing them the Bay of Pigs, just as LBJ's people would blame Jack for Vietnam, and so on. Sometimes it gets hard to remember in whose administration what things happened. Who subverted Iran? Guatemala? Chile? Who sent troops where? The continuum of postwar policy flows serenely through the presidencies." Carrying corpses downstream.

THE GOOD FIGHT On January 1, 1944, Major Hugh Stewart consults Colonel Frank Capra about his film *Tunisian Victory,* which depicts the Anglo-American military triumph in North Africa. Auxiliary Daphne Hudson looks on.

The U.S. is the planet's sole remaining superpower, unrivaled in military reach and might, and yet our leaders have us leaping at every mouse.

With a chronological arc stretching from W.W. II to the present, *Why We Fight* may sound like an audio-visual survey course. It is, and it isn't. The historical backdrop provides the overture to its inflection point, its pivotal spike: September 11, 2001. It is a day that refuses to lie flat in the pages of history. Like *Fahrenheit 9/11, Why We Fight* attempts to part the billowing clouds of a waking nightmare to trace and fathom the jagged line that led from the Twin Towers to the toppled statue of Saddam Hussein. How the hell did we get from here to there? How did a campaign to avenge 9/11 and overthrow the Taliban detour into the way-Off-Broadway production of "Shock and Awe"? *Why We Fight*'s answer is no Cracker Jack–box surprise: American foreign policy was commandeered by a scrum of neoconservative ideologues who had been biding their

time under President Clinton and slid into positions of power at the behest of Cheney and Rumsfeld after Bush's election in 2000. It was a slow-motion coup d'état. The neocon hawks were now able to implement what they had been propounding in print for years: transformational change to clear out the deadwood of despotic regimes and convert former adversaries into American franchises. Imperialists without apology, the neocons made it imperative that the United States fill the void left by the fall of the Soviet Union and shape the future in our Mount Rushmore image. The U.S. had not only the right but the duty to intervene whenever a potential foe popped his head out of the hole. "What's the big fuss about pre-emption?" American Enterprise Institute resident fellow Richard Perle asks in *Why We Fight,* as if addressing a nursery-school class of the none-too-bright.

From her office at the Department of Defense, retired lieutenant colonel Karen Kwiatkowski (who sounds like the dentist's wife in *Waiting for Guffman*) witnessed with dismay the neocon body snatching of foreign policy, which she and other observers in the film attribute to the corpulent influence of think tanks. (Think tanks: the fencing academies of neoconservatives, who like to fancy themselves the intellectual-warrior caste.) Very little foreign policy is made by the foreign-policy establishment, notes Joseph Cirincione of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Like so much in American life, it has been outsourced, privatized, prostituted. A harmonic convergence has been achieved within the military-industrial complex that outdoes Eisenhower's worst premonitions: think-tankers, lobbyists, former military officers, and politicians spin through the revolving door between the public and private sectors to serve on the boards or in the executive suites of corporations that do business with the Pentagon. When Halliburton's former chief Dick Cheney swore the oath of office as vice president in 2001, it was the consummation of these incestuous relations. "[We] elected a government contractor as vice president," says Charles Lewis, of the Center for Public Integrity.

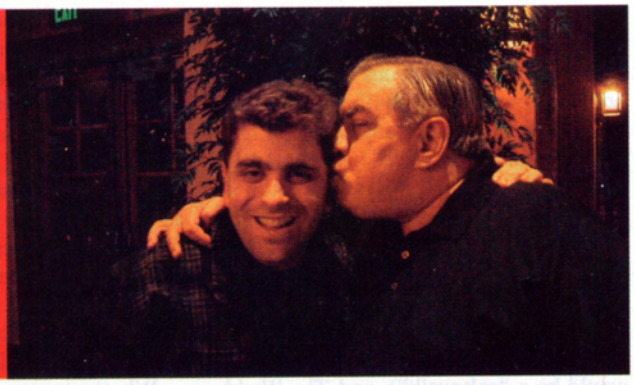
The role of the neocons and their host bodies in crafting Bush policy is no brow-splitting thunderbolt to anyone who's read James Mann's *Rise of the Vulcans* and Vidal's *Dreaming War* or watched Robert Greenwald's *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* and Adam Curtis's *The Power of Nightmares.* What's valuable about *Why We Fight* is seeing Perle, Ken Adelman, arms-control director under President Reagan (he who sunnily predicted that the invasion of Iraq would be a "cakewalk"), and *The Weekly Standard*'s editor, William Kristol, on-screen pickled in the juices of their own insider status and papal infallibility, devoid of any guilt or contrition over the bloody mess they helped unleash in Iraq. It would take a horse doctor to pry even a modest admission of error out of these guys. To see the beguiling smirk on Kristol's face as he faux-modestly soft-pedals the influence of PNAC (the neoconservative think tank Project for the New American Century), to hear Perle attest to the integrity of Dick Cheney with the fervency of one Borgia sticking up for another ("If I am sure of anything, I'm sure of this: Vice President Cheney had nothing to do with the award of any contract to Halliburton"), is to register the presence of a new species of bird of prey, one that preens not just its feathers but its claws.

As a counterpoint to such righteous certitude unfazed by the facts, *Why We Fight* tracks the journey of a retired New York City cop named Wilton Sekzer, whose elevated train into work each day made a screeching turn that yanked the Manhattan skyline and the Twin Towers into vista view. On that bright, pellucid September morning in 2001, when the blue sky seemed like a magnifying lens, Sekzer looks out the window after the train rounds the curve, and sees that one of the towers is pouring smoke. His son Jason works at the World Trade Center, and Sekzer realizes that if his son is still inside he's a goner. He was. In the grief and anger of the following days, Sekzer phones NBC to beg them to stop showing the footage of the towers' collapse: "How many times are you going to show those goddamn towers coming down? . . . Please stop. You're ripping my heart out." He couldn't watch, and he couldn't not watch, as the networks broadcast the towers tumbling again and again as if their collapse were playing on a continuous loop. Protests from enough viewers finally shamed the networks into ceasing nonstop flogging of the towers footage, which had the effect of reducing al-Qaeda's feat of mass murder to video wallpaper.

What's strange is that, after the initial orgy of endless replay, 9/11 footage has entered the realm of taboo. Apart from documentaries such as National Geographic's *Inside 9/11* and the French filmmakers Gedeon and Jules Naudet's *9/11* (which captured amazing footage from inside the north tower minutes before its collapse), so much of what happened that day before thousands of cameras and millions of viewers has been sanitized for our protection, filed away in the video vault, flushed down the memory hole. It's as if a crack that opened in the collective psyche had to be closed, its hallucinatory contents repressed. When TV runs a library clip of the towers falling, it's usually a high-altitude telephoto shot that confers grandeur from afar. The collapse looks stately, self-contained, silently majestic—shrouded in inevitability. The casualties are too distant even to register as dots. The climactic fall appears self-actuating, as if the buildings had wearied of their own existence and detonated themselves. (TV seldom shows footage of the airliners striking the towers, which set everything into motion.) Understandably, no one wants to be accused of exploiting 9/11 carnage and deaths for ghoulish effect. Even the provocateur Michael Moore cut to black in *Fahrenheit 9/11* once he reached the fateful day, letting the sounds of sirens, cries, and chaos fill the auditoriums of our imagination. To pacify critics of his forthcoming 9/11 film, as yet untitled, director Oliver Stone took pre-emptive action by assuring survivors' families that he wouldn't re-create the towers' falling. Everything connected to the Ground Zero memorial has

WE LIKE IKE
President Dwight Eisenhower, who had been a World War II general, gives his farewell speech from the White House, January 17, 1961.

The key scripture in *Why We Fight* is Eisenhower's prophetic warning about the menace of what he termed the "military-industrial complex."



EYES ON THE PRIZE Eugene Jarecki, the director of *Why We Fight*, and film subject Wilton Sekzer before the film won best documentary at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, January 29, 2005.

How did a campaign to avenge 9/11 and overthrow the Taliban detour into the way-Off-Broadway production of "Shock and Awe"?

been conducted on tender tiptoe. The events of 9/11 inflicted the most visible trauma in mankind's history, and yet a veil has been dropped over it, as if Americans must hug the official findings of the 9/11 commission and keep their mitts off Pandora's box.

People don't vanish, Jim. It's a molecular impossibility.

—Grissom (William Petersen), addressing a missing person's case on *CSI*.

Roger Copeland's *The Unrecovered* peels off the protective lid to let out dark thoughts and speculations. Copeland might be labeled an accidental *auteur*. A professor of theater and dance at Oberlin College in Ohio and the author of a bold expedition into the work and times of choreographer Merce Cunningham (*Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance*), Copeland became obsessed by the conspiracy theories and counter-narratives that spidered out of 9/11 (emerging in documentaries such as *The Great Deception*) and got busy on a fictional treatment. He managed to wrangle a few grants and, using Oberlin locations and talent, was able to shoot the movie for a dinky $50,000. There's nothing minimalist about the results. The title, *The Unrecovered*, refers to the bodies that were never recovered at Ground Zero, lives that were seemingly zapped out of existence in an apocalyptic flash and endure only as ghosts of memory. No wonder Halloween looms over *The Unrecovered*'s sub-lunar realm. The whole movie is a haunting, incorporating actual footage of bodies falling from the W.T.C. towers like stricken birds to spook us to a higher recognition of what true shock and awe looks like. The survivors left behind coping with loss and grappling with dead air include a teenage girl who has lost her father; a survivalist who views 9/11 as a scorched page out of the Book of Revelation, vindicating evidence that end-time is near; and a postmodern musician who suffers from insomnia, nodding in and out of consciousness to the rhythm of the white pulse on his Apple computer screen. All three are sifting through the debris of that day and diagramming its trajectories in the hopes of discovering or confirming a hidden pattern, a buried message, an encoded transmission. A personal reply that will enable each to find a separate peace.

It's a highbrow scavenger hunt, with Copeland himself orchestrating the search party. Drawing from folk myth, pop culture (*Fight Club*, whose pre-cognitive vision of 9/11 furnishes the movie's climax), talk-show discussions, chaos theory, media studies, musicology (much ado about the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, who was vilified after being misleadingly quoted as proclaiming 9/11 "the greatest work of art in the whole cosmos"), numerology, and literary conceits (such as the concept of "information sickness," drawn from Ted Mooney's 1981 novel, *Easy Travel to Other Planets*), Copeland's safari into the collective unconscious seeks to decipher the signs and symbols of the falling towers and find the links in the broken chain of evidence, a unifying theory. Skeptics and detractors might dismiss *The Unrecovered* as an arty-farty academic exercise, and any film dedicated to the memory of Susan Sontag risks being called pretentious. The gutsy thing about this brainy movie is that it doesn't care about the risk. It has the courage of its own detective zeal. Articulate and quirkily analytical, *The Unrecovered* suggests a cross between a Spalding Gray monologue and the digital scrapbooks of late-period Jean-Luc Godard (where Godard seems to be making movies in his pajamas, rummaging through the remains of the 20th century). For a word guy, Copeland knows how to tease the maximum meaning out of images and juxtapose them to achieve magic realism. He turns the instructional video of a flight attendant demonstrating safety procedures into a ribbon of grief, and gets tone poems out of a backyard swing, construction cranes, the totemic authority of a hotel-room TV, skeins of branches against a winter sky.

It might seem that *Why We Fight* and *The Unrecovered* occupy separate compartments. One is factual, linear, emphatic; the other is ruminative, Cubistic, evocative. As different as Edward R. Murrow and Edgar Allan Poe. But they share a sadness, an unresolved ache. Closure eludes them both. The searchers in *The Unrecovered* end in various stages of resignation, their souls emptied out. Stewing with a desire for justice and payback, Sekzer—*Why We Fight*'s Everyman figure—petitions the military to honor his son's memory by stenciling his name on one of the bombs earmarked for Iraq. When his wish is granted and a 2,000-pound guided munition bearing his son's name ("In loving memory of Jason Sekzer") is dropped, hitting God knows what and killing God knows whom, Sekzer is grateful—only to be dumbfounded when Bush admits at a press conference that there was no evidence Saddam Hussein had a hand in 9/11. "I almost jumped out of the chair. 'I don't know where people got the idea that I connected Iraq to 9/11.' What, is he nuts, or what? What'd the hell we go in there for? We're getting back for 9/11. Well, if he [Hussein] didn't have anything to do with 9/11, why're we going in there?" Why, indeed.

And with those questions we come full vicious circle, still confounded at how the grief and fury of 9/11 propelled us into the jaws of Iraq with the job left unfinished in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's stealth disintegration is the subject of investigative reporter Michele Mitchell's in-production documentary, *The Good War*, which stations itself at the bloody intersection where warlords, contractors, and mercenaries do business with death, and the trickle of similar documentaries about the War on Terror promises to grow torrential. When George Bush was re-elected, in 2004, some pundits gleefully interpreted it as a repudiation of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, proof that Michael Moore and everything he bulkily represents had been rejected by "real Americans." Now a majority of those polled agree with Moore's stance about the Iraq war and accept his accusation that we were deliberately misled. They've come around. In a time of deception, documentaries like Moore's and Jarecki's are dangerous weapons, packing the conviction and firepower of Bob Dylan's "Masters of War," a protest song that—sadly—never goes out of date. □

CLAUDIA BECKER