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While freedom is hot, truth is molten

By Syed Nadzri

I WATCHED Fahrenheit 9/11 the other day and had my curiosity melted away by two hours of uninterrupted Bush-whacking. But the movie didn't move me the way it has most Americans. In fact I think many non-Americans would be dispassionate about it as well, no matter how they feel about US policies or President George W. Bush or Michael Moore, who wrote and directed the film.

Fahrenheit 9/11, which is sizzling at the US box office with a collection of more than US\$100 million (RM380 million) so far (declared the best grossing documentary in history) shoots at Bush on all cylinders - from the day he got elected to office, which the movie disputes, to the invasion of Iraq, which it raucously criticises.

In all fairness, Moore certainly did well to piece together the entire production, including a scene where, like a journalist, he approached one congressman after another to ask them whether they would volunteer to let their sons or daughters be drafted for duty in Iraq. Another showed the outpouring of emotion of the families of those killed, Americans and Iraqis.

There was also close-up footage of Bush said to be taken just after the terror attacks of Sept 11 as well as reports of his alleged links with Osama bin Laden's family.

The movie is an extension of Stupid White Men and Dude, Where's My Country? - the two books written by Moore which I found rather crude.

An example of Moore's zany thoughts and wacky writing can be seen in Stupid White Men, where he parodies a typical day in the life of Bush, which includes breakfast in bed at 8.30am as Donald Rumsfeld reads him the day's horoscopes and comics.

Many Americans would like to think that movies and books like these represent the freedom that is their country. They reckon that they don't have to agree with what Moore says as long as they allow Moore the right to express his thoughts - that's why some describe Fahrenheit 9/11 as the temperature at which freedom burns.

Freedom, I'm sure, is what everyone everywhere yearns for. But truth is sacred. That's why they say that while freedom is hot, truth is molten.

In certain respects, Malaysians are not totally unfamiliar with such situations because even though documentary movies on Malaysian politics have yet to be screened publicly, books of that nature do make it into the market every now and then.

Former Pas MP Datuk Shahnon Ahmad, for instance, authored a couple of equally controversial and perhaps even cruder books a few years ago. Even the titles of the books are not printable here.

In fact, books on Malaysian politics and businesses providing what some perceive as the alternative perspective, are freely available on the shelves in bookstores everywhere - some trashy and some well-researched.

Then there were also many websites created after the fall-out between former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. Many of these were bold and bizarre, with tales, gossip and spins that were enough to make you dizzy.

From a Malaysian perspective, I think whichever way you look at it, they make good specimens and case studies for constitutional law or libel law classes.

But more than anything else, Fahrenheit 9/11 has only served to make me

more confused about the US and its people. That's because of what happened to singer Linda Ronstadt last week.

First, a movie that brutally seeks to tear apart a serving US President is freely allowed, attesting firmly to freedom of expression as a hallmark of the system. Then, when a celebrity went on stage to publicly endorse the film and praise Moore, she got booed and cast out.

That's what happened to Ronstadt when she was performing at the Aladdin nightclub in Las Vegas.

According to reports, the crowd turned unruly when she dedicated Desperado, her last song for the evening, to Moore, who she said was someone who cares about their country deeply and was trying to help.

All hell broke loose after that as some of the angry fans reportedly defaced posters of her in the lobby of the hotel, writing comments and tossing drinks at her pictures. The tribute to Moore also prompted Aladdin president Bill Timmins, who attended the concert, to eject Ronstadt from the property.

Now, isn't that a contradiction? People flock to see Moore's film and that's fine. But when someone publicly declares support for him, that's not okay. And they did that to Ronstadt, who still looks sweet at 58.

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