

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Thank You for Smoking*]

### Lighting Up the Screen

By Steve Sailer

AS THE AVERAGE American ages, public interest in music and film declines while the obsession with politics grows. Baby boomers, who spent the 1960s arguing over the Beatles vs. the Stones and then the 1970s debating De Niro vs. Pacino, now call in to talk radio to harangue about Republicans vs. Democrats.

Hollywood was slow to catch on, but since “Fahrenheit 9/11” it’s been pushing left-wing agitprop like “Syriana.” While plenty of money could be made with right-wing movies, the box-office slump will have to get a lot deeper before Hollywood will stoop so low as to appeal to the 51 percent of the public that voted the wrong way in 2004.

In the meantime, fortunately, there’s the witty centrist satire “Thank You for Smoking.” It’s a reasonably faithful adaptation of the 1994 novel by Christopher Buckley (son of William F.) about the chief spokesman for the tobacco industry, the “yuppie Mephistopheles” Nick Naylor. Produced by David O. Sacks, a research fellow at the libertarian-conservative Independent Institute, the film’s plague-on-both-your-houses attitude toward cigarette companies and their killjoy enemies probably won’t make it a huge hit, but it’s smart and entertaining, although more amusing than hilarious.

Young director Jason Reitman (son of Ivan, director of “Ghostbusters”) has chosen his cast wisely. Robert Duvall plays a sly old North Carolina tobacco billionaire. Sam Elliott, who has been the great American cowboy character actor during a generation almost bereft of great American cowboy movies, portrays a former Marlboro Man whom Nick must bribe to shut up about his lung cancer.

Katie Holmes is an ethics-free reporter who seduces Nick to advance her career. In the book, the redheaded vixen Heather Holloway is clearly based on the *New York Times*’ Maureen Dowd. Holmes, who is now engaged to Tom Cruise, seems to have modeled her character on the life, however, of Katie Holmes.

As Nick, the square-jawed all-American face of tobacco on TV talk shows, Aaron Eckhart is perfectly cast. Eckhart’s career as a leading man has never taken off because, with his blond hair and movie star’s dimpled chin, he’s annoyingly handsome. Eckhart played the meek grad student beaten down by his unmanly job in the 2002 version of A.S. Byatt’s famous novel *Possession*, but the actor looked too much like an Enron CFO-in-training for the film to work. Like Rob Lowe—who pops up as a Mike Ovitz-style superagent—Eckhart is better suited for antiheroes, and he has a memorable one to play here. “If you argue correctly, you’re never wrong,” he instructs his 12-year-old son.

The Bush era has seen the triumph of this kind of “marketing major postmodernism,” the assumption, picked up vaguely in college while studying advertising, that some egghead over in Europe proved there is no such thing as truth, so why worry about the veracity of your spin?

Still, Nick is not a representative exemplar of our age of talking points because he’s far more self-aware than is typical. He knows he’s lying when he claims there’s no scientific evidence that smoking damages health. He just likes the challenge, the money, and, most appealingly, outwitting the self-righteous—especially when they are right.

That kind of raffish cynicism is rare. Every week, I encounter writers who lie for personal and political advantage, but they’re much drearier personalities. They fib fashionably about democratizing the Middle East or race or gender, and their dishonesty makes them feel better about themselves because it’s in a good cause.

“Thank You for Smoking” spent 12 years in Hollywood’s Development Hell, and it’s showing its age. The \$246 billion tobacco settlement of 1998 transformed the cigarette companies from harried prey requiring the frantic efforts of a Nick Naylor to valued junior partners of state governments. (A more contemporary client for Nick would have been the Indian gaming industry.)

Moreover, Nick’s complaint that movies are anti-cigarette, that only “psychopaths and Europeans” smoke in films anymore, seems badly out of date. Oddly enough, “Thank You for Smoking” is one of relatively few movies these days where none of the stars smoke. Lighting up is presently considered the surest way to give characters that edgy “indie” attitude. That’s why a study in *The Lancet* found that there was as much smoking in movies in 2002 as in Humphrey Bogart’s heyday. Despite all its high-minded talk, Hollywood cares more about its coolness quotient than its social conscience. ■

Rated R for language and some sexual content.

## BOOKS

[*Rebel-in-Chief: Inside the Bold and Controversial Presidency of George W. Bush*, Fred Barnes, Crown Forum, 224 pages]

# Let Me Shine Your Shoes, Sir

By Scott McConnell

THE BIGGEST QUESTION raised by Fred Barnes's *Rebel-in-Chief* is whether the author's embarrassment is a closely held secret among family and close friends or more widely admitted. Embarrassment there must be, for Barnes is a capable writer, even a good one. To those who read him in *The New Republic* or saw him on "The McLaughlin Group" in the 1980s and 1990s, he was a refreshing type in a throwback sort of way: a not terribly ideological, intellectually unpretentious conservative, Republican in his instincts; a suburban Virginia family man; a reporter with good sources and a crisp, fact-filled prose style. Perfect for the slot of token Republican at *The New Republic* in its 1980s heyday.

But for readers who might wonder what it is like to be North Korean and required to read formulaic biographies of great helmsman Kim Il Sung and his son, an afternoon spent with *Rebel-in-Chief* should provide a proximate answer.

In Barnes's defense, the book is a representative product of a large neo-Republican publishing industry that has sprung up in the past five years to tap the market for conservative books aimed just below the middle of the brow—gifts to give the friend or parent who is an avid Hannity and O'Reilly watcher, to be thumbed through perhaps more than read. This is a large market, previously underserved.

In his acknowledgments, Barnes tells of writing an opinion piece for the *Wall Street Journal* on George W. Bush as an

"insurgent" president. Many would find this an unlikely designation for a man who was essentially anointed as heir apparent by Republican elites, a very fortunate son who floated from business partnerships where he did no real work into the Texas governor's mansion, a man who unlike anyone else you've ever known suffered no adverse professional consequences for being an alcoholic with no real accomplishments at age 40. But for Barnes, this experience was the perfect training for the president "as rebel," enabling him to disregard conventional Beltway knowledge, the tiresome stuff of diplomats, science advisors, and other "experts."

It is as if the Bush presidency were the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Better Red Than Expert!) reformulated GOP-style, a place where experience and specialized knowledge are always the subject of suspicion. (Why was it not surprising when news leaked out that a 24-year-old campaign worker without a college degree, promoted to a NASA press aide position by the Bush administration, tried to block the director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies from speaking to the public about global warming?) Bush of course doesn't send the pointy heads to re-education camps, but, as Barnes reports cheerfully, he ignores them.

Barnes's *Journal* piece led inevitably to a book contract with, one imagines, a wink and a nod that the book wouldn't actually require, as a real book would, concentrated work that would distract Barnes from his day job at *The Weekly Standard* or TV show "The Beltway Boys"—neither negligible in their demands of time and energy. If the advance is good enough, why not take the bait?

The core of *Rebel-in-Chief* is that George W. Bush, by virtue of his rebellion against conventional liberal/centrist Beltway counsel and the prudent, cautious conservative establishment wisdom, has been an astonishingly successful president, well-deserving of Natan Sharansky's flattery—"Mr. President, I see you are a dissident. Dissidents believe in an idea. They suffer a lot. But

history proves them right." The main evidence for this success has been Iraq and the war on terror, so naturally Barnes attests that the Bush foreign policy is working out swimmingly. For example:

During the Iraq War and its aftermath, non-Bush Washington hollered repeatedly for an announced exit strategy. Bush demurred, arguing that a declared plan for getting out could only prolong a conflict and encourage the enemy to hang tight. With the success of the Iraqi election, Bush was vindicated.

And:

For Bush, the tight partnership [with Tony Blair] is an essential ingredient of his new foreign policy in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It is a world-changing policy crafted mostly by Bush himself, not his advisers. And it is a policy that has significantly strengthened America's strategic position in the world.

And:

The 9/11 assault by al Qaeda terrorists changed Bush's approach to foreign policy in important ways. Within hours of the attacks, Bush was already fashioning a new policy. It was a Bush policy, not the work of his advisers. He was no longer the attentive student. Now he was the policy maker. And the president was soon finding new allies and shedding old ones. National Security Adviser Rice, Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell—they followed their leader.

There are dozens of paragraphs like this, emphasizing Bush's "bold vision" vindicated by "dazzling" democratic elections, portraying Bush "taking charge" and "deftly" moving Israelis and Palestinians closer to peace "than at any time in decades" and thereby turning the whole volatile Middle East into "Bush Country."