

Mike from Michigan

By Jeffrey L. Reynolds

By his own admission, Michael Moore was the perfect all-American boy. He was born in the shadows of a General Motors plant, became an Eagle Scout and believed in God, country and the NRA, which once gave him a marksmanship award. He attended the seminary in hopes of becoming a priest, never smoked a joint—much less inhaled—and was elected to public office by the tender age of 18. Moore seemed destined to end up in either the marble corridors of corporate America or the wood-paneled halls of the Beltway elite. And so he has, but not exactly by invitation. In fact, he's one of the guys that CEOs and House Speakers have come to fear most. They scan the crowd for his trademark baseball hat, rumpled figure and devilish grin as they step from their limousines, praying to God he's still off chasing Roger.

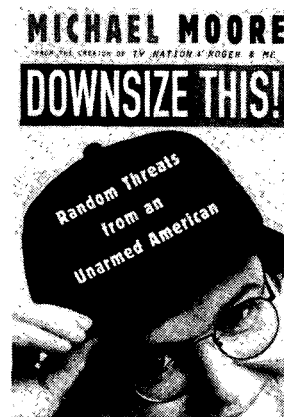
For two and a half years, Moore tried to track down elusive GM chairman Roger Smith to find out why, despite record company profits, he pink-slipped 30,000 workers and decimated Moore's hometown of Flint, Mich. Smith's army of rent-a-cops, PR flacks and Armani-clad bureaucrats ultimately prevailed, but the irrepressibly impish Moore got the last laugh as he chronicled his relentless quest in *Roger & Me*—a 1989 film that remains the most popular documentary of all time.

His subsequent forays on to the big screen have met with mixed results. *Pets or Meat: The Return to Flint* received critical acclaim, but Alan Alda and John Candy couldn't save the hapless *Canadian Bacon*, an instantly forgotten 1995 satire about a fight between Canada and a bored United States. But even the highbrow Hollywood set loved the biting satire, in-your-face social commentary and irreverent wit of *TV Nation*. For two summer seasons—1994 on NBC and 1995 on Fox—the mischievous Moore had us playing Frisbee with Jack Kevorkian, scoping out bargain real estate deals in Love Canal, and standing outside IBM's towering headquarters with a bullhorn challenging corporate execs to come down and prove their ability to format a disk. All that

Emmy Award-winning rabble-rousing must have made network suits a bit nervous; although Moore has secured funding for a third season (from the BBC), it's still not clear if any U.S. outlet will pick it up. Fans hungry for relief from the lobotomized fall lineup should drop Fox a note, but not before picking up *Downsize This! Random Threats from an Unarmed American*.

With this, his first book, Moore is back with a vengeance, delivering a stinging indictment of the economic, political and social lunacy that will probably keep more than 100 million Americans—about 60 percent of the eligible voting population—away from the polls on November 5. He good-naturedly trounces Bob Dole, Newt Gingrich, Jesse Helms and an impressive roster of corporate America's biggest “welfare Mamas,” while simultaneously bringing a breath of fresh air to a campaign season laden with half-assed promises, nauseating commercials and boring tell-all best-sellers. Whether he's recounting Rep. Bob Dornan's episodes of insanity to a psychiatric center nurse, outlining innovative ways to sneak into the United States, writing campaign contribution checks on behalf of Abortionists for Buchanan and Satan Worshipers for Dole, or trying to convince the Commerce Department to move to Mexico, he's having a good time—something American politics desperately needs.

“What is Terrorism?” Moore asks in the opening pages of the book, then answers his own question with two stunningly similar pictures of the bombed-out Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the remnants of a partially demolished factory in Flint. He notes with irony that the Ryder truck, the current vehicle of choice for frustrated terrorists, is the same vehicle used to cart around the belongings of nomadic Americans displaced, downsized and disemployed by CEOs who have been rewarded with ever more stratospheric salaries. Take AT&T chairman Robert Allen, who pink-slipped 40,000 workers and made \$116 million, or Scott Paper CEO Albert “Chainsaw Al” Dunlap, who fired 11,100 people, merged with Kimberly-Clark and awarded himself \$100 million. Readers can only hope that what goes around comes around when they learn that for every 1 percent increase in the jobless rate, homicides increase by 6.7 percent, violent crimes by 3.4 percent and property crimes by 2.4 percent. The only surprise is that truck bombings and post-office-style workplace murders aren't more common—if you were a laid-off Scott Paper employee, wouldn't you be tempted to



Downsize This! Random Threats from an Unarmed American
By Michael Moore
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take matters into your own hands?

If you're still employed, your wallet probably seems a bit thinner this year. That's because we each kicked in an average of \$1,388 to the \$170 billion federal ADC (that's Aid to Dependent Corporations, not children) program that supports Lockheed Martin, Archer Daniels Midland, Mercedes-Benz and Sears, Roebuck. It's safe to say that Moore is speaking for millions when he tells the balding corporate villains profiled in his series of Corporate Crook Trading Cards, "Get off your lazy corporate ass and find new ways to employ Americans, clean up our air and water, and pay your fair share in taxes—or we're going to run your CEO and his cronies off to jail."

The 20 million Americans who are currently unemployed or earning below poverty-level wages aren't the only ones entitled to Moore's sympathy. Going the pro-life movement one better, he devotes one chapter to an impassioned defense of sperm.

Though the arguments aren't quite as compelling as those for displaced workers, they're every bit as amusing. "As a man," he writes, "I can tell you from firsthand observation that billions and billions of sperm are being senselessly slaughtered each and every day." Highlighting sperm's role as the very first building block of life, Moore condemns the masturbators/killers who fail to hear "the silent screams of these little babies as their fathers mindlessly dispose of them in a Kleenex" and tries to enlist the help of the National Right to Life Committee in his crusade. Intriguingly named RTL spokesman Christian Polking expresses personal support for a Save the Sperm campaign, but eventually balks at organizational involvement. Moore hangs up the phone empty-handed, so to speak.

Militias seem to be in vogue these days, so Moore spends his final chapter plugging "Mike's Militia—a sort of all-purpose group for the firearm-challenged." Big, hairy Ted Nugent-looking guys carrying guns need not apply. If you're interested, you must be willing to: Do to the Democratic Party what the Christian Coalition has done to the Republicans; descend on state and national capitals to push for increased protections from corporate America; boycott companies that downsize for profit; work to open abortion clinics in the 80 percent of the country that has none; deliver AFL-CIO cards to 7-11 clerks throughout the country; produce a cable access show that doesn't look like shit; and use

that www thing to organize others. It's an amusing concept, but also a serious call to action from a not-so-serious guy.

Moore has an uncanny knack for pissing people off, an uncommon ability to make them laugh, and an almost unnatural gift to make them think. He's as cherubic as Ralph Reed, as populist as Ross Perot and as passionate as Pats

Buchanan and Robertson. Most important, he's seized and tried to build

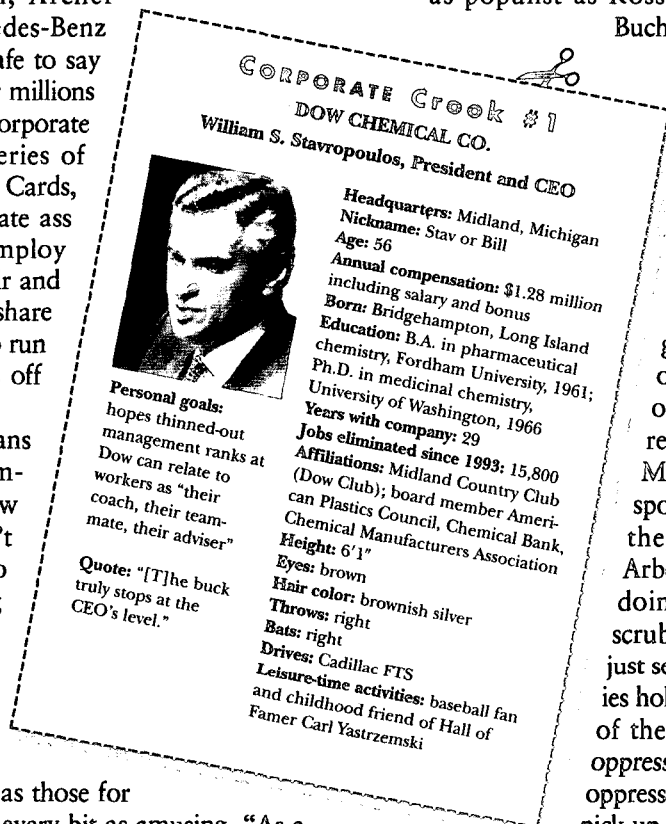
upon America's roots of discontent and defiance in a way that the head-shaking, hand-wringing gloom and doom left hasn't. His growing popularity is proof positive that Americans love leftist ideas but hate a stale, sputtering and dying movement that's out of touch and growing more irrelevant each day. In one of the book's many half-humorous, half-affecting passages, Moore relates his discovery that Mark from Michigan, the notorious militia spokesman, is, in real life, a janitor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "What is the left in Ann Arbor doing while Mark from Michigan is scrubbing their floors and toilets? I can just see it now—all the groovy nineties lefties holding their PC meetings in Room 305 of the student union, talking about the oppressed masses and not even noticing the oppressed Mark from Michigan who has to pick up their half-empty Starbucks cups filled with soaked cigarette butts. Mark needs some

help, but he's an invisible man to this crowd."

No wonder Clinton campaigns with a centrist triangulation strategy that cynically ignores the needs of working people: They have nowhere else to go. But if there's no left alternative to the Democrats in this country, it's not for lack of a constituency. Moore reminds us that Jane and Joe Six-pack are more open-minded—and much more pissed off—than we give them credit for.

The same workers who shouted "Take this Job and Shove it" in the '60s and '70s when unemployment rates were low and unions were strong are now seething in silence as they work longer hours for fewer dollars under worsening conditions. There are no jobs to shove and launching a workplace rebellion or telling your boss where to go as you head out the door to the unemployment office has become a bit impractical. But that doesn't mean workers are acquiescing in their plight. While a simplistic anthem updated for the post-NAFTA '90s won't win our jobs back, it might help to relieve frustration, fear and despair. Sure, "Downsize This!" bellowed in conjunction with the obligatory crotch-grab seems kind of crude, but it sure beats mowing down your bosses with a semiautomatic.

Jeffrey L. Reynolds is a freelance writer based in New York.



Health care

Continued from page 16

incurred by the provisions concerning the MSAs, long-term care insurance and advisory opinions, the bill added a subtitle on expatriation taxes, which declared that expatriates must only pay U.S. taxes on their U.S. income. To explain how this tax break was in fact revenue-generating, the JCT claimed that, by giving in to expatriates, the subtitle would provide a smaller incentive for early expatriation. Thus, billionaires would expatriate later and pay higher expatriation taxes when they did.

When the House finished its job on the bill in March, it appeared that their bundle of deals had wrecked any chance of the bill's final passage. In particular, the mainstream press reported that the House's MSA provisions for Golden Rule were a deal-breaker. Kassebaum and Kennedy both rejected the MSA provisions. However, with presidential elections pending, the White House wanted some sort of a bill to shield it from charges that the president promised action and did nothing on health insurance.

With the White House calling for a compromise, Kennedy entered into negotiations with House Republicans. On July 25, they reached an agreement. On MSAs, Kennedy and House Republicans settled on a provision that would supposedly put a cap of 750,000 on the number of MSAs that could be sold. The mechanism for enforcing this agreement, however, appears so weak that many on Capitol Hill believe that millions of policies could be sold before the limit kicks in. Kennedy also managed to knock out a few additional pieces of pork that the Republicans had inserted in the bill when it was in the House, but the MSAs and all the payoffs described above were still in it. The HIAA's reaction said it all. "Overall," said HIAA President Willis Gradison, "we think it is a very good bill."

Some House Democrats were unhappy with the bill, but they were pressured by the White House into voting for it. Back in 1994, when the Clinton Health Security Act was under consideration, Reps. Pat Williams (D-MT) and Pete Stark (D-CA) chaired the only two House committees that passed major health insurance reform bills. This August, Williams and Stark were the only two members of the House who voted against the Kassebaum-Kennedy bill. "This bill is not a bold first step," Williams said. "It is a final, sad stumble toward the pretense of health reform." The Senate then unanimously approved the bill.

The Kassebaum-Kennedy bill has made the chances of significant expansion of health insurance even more remote. It reflects the weakness of the Democrats' advocacy on behalf of the uninsured. Not only were Democrats satisfied with the smallest of extensions of coverage, they were willing to get it at the price of big rewards for corporate interests with deep pockets. ◀

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Wellstone

Continued from page 19

was the reverse; 46 percent said they would vote for Boschwitz while only 38 percent chose Wellstone.

And so it now appears that Wellstone—who has often expressed his disdain for politics-by-soundbite—has decided to fight fire with fire. In mid-September, his campaign announced it had retained Mandy Grunwald, a key operative in Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign whose résumé also includes the effort to unseat Sen. Bob Packwood (R-OR) ("If your boss stuck his tongue down your throat, would he keep his job?" one of her ads asked.) Shortly after she came on, the Wellstone campaign unveiled its first openly negative ad, blasting Boschwitz for voting to increase his Senate pay. "It may not be what people expected of us," acknowledges a Wellstone strategist. "But it's what we had to do in the face of the million-dollar sleaze coming at us."

Pragmatic as the decision to hire Grunwald may have been, her arrival marks the end of something a lot of people had hoped for. "For a while, it looked as if this might be a different kind of campaign," says Steven Schier, a Carleton College political science professor who once taught alongside Wellstone. "The most surprising thing is that this has turned into a cookie-cutter campaign, not much different from what's going on all over the country. The news is that there is nothing new."

All of which, of course, doesn't mean it's over for Wellstone. While he's changed his tune on tactical points, he remains unapologetic about his populist positions—positions that, he's betting, still appeal to a substantial portion of the electorate. He also still has the strongest grass-roots field organization ever in Minnesota, and possibly in the country, along with a voter-registration drive of unprecedented proportions. Not to mention massive, targeted phone-bank efforts, door-knocking and barnstorming—all the trappings of the kind of grass-roots campaigning whose poster child Wellstone has been for the past six years. "This is better than 1990," gushes one veteran worker when asked to compare the two campaigns, "because now we've got the resources."

It's only on rare occasions, and privately, that Wellstone's most avid supporters bring up the possibility that precisely those resources, and what it took to get them, will prove his undoing. As everyone who's taken a close look at the 1990 numbers knows, the margin for victory came in large part from a group hardly any poll ever measures: People who didn't vote before or since, who normally vote for third-party candidates, or who simply pulled the lever for Wellstone because he seemed, somehow, different. If they don't choose to come back this time—if, that is, they are turned off by what seems like yet another campaign-as-usual—it won't be just the senator's political career that has ended. ◀

Monika Bauerlein is managing editor of the Minneapolis/St. Paul alternative weekly *City Pages*.

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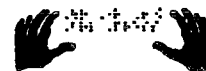
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