

Reel History: Should ABC Have Yanked *The Path to 9/11*?

The Path to 9/11

Directed by David L. Cunningham

Written by Cyrus Nowrasteh

Produced by Marc Platt/Touchstone Television

Drama. 240 Minutes. 2006

By Max Holland

It's an argument as old as the movies themselves: what obligation does Hollywood have to history? When filmmakers claim they are depicting a real event, do they enjoy complete dramatic license? Are they free to create fictional characters, compress time, conflate some events and erase others, invent dialogue, and put real people in fictional situations? Is there a point after which filmmakers risk having their license revoked?

If there is such a limit, the ABC-TV network would seem to have violated it, judging from the public outburst over its docudrama *The Path to 9/11*, which was televised over two days in September and touted as "based on the 9/11 Commission Report." Former President Clinton denounced the \$40 million miniseries for not telling the truth, as did his former national security adviser Sandy Berger, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and Richard Clarke, Clinton's counter-terrorism chief, who labeled the five hours an "egregious distortion."

Most irksome to Berger is a fictional scene in which he declines to give the go-ahead to CIA-supported raiders in Afghanistan who have Osama bin Laden in their gun sights prior to 9/11. Before the drama was broadcast, a group of historians, headed by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., wrote to ABC stating that the broadcast would be a "gross disservice" to the public and urged ABC to cancel it.

ABC, owned by the Walt Disney corporation, was also the target of attacks by elements of the left/liberal blog-osphere, which were hoping to replicate an earlier and successful Internet revolt against CBS. In the fall of 2003, conservative bloggers and their supporters pummeled CBS with an estimated 80,000 angry e-mails demanding the cancellation of a planned miniseries about Ronald Reagan that was less than favorable to him. Under intense fire, CBS eventually caved and relegated what conservatives maintained was a "hit job" on Reagan to its affiliated Showtime channel and a much smaller, cable audience.

It can be hard to find one's bearings when such controversies erupt. Defending provably false history, or an unprovable version of events, is not a comfortable position to assume. But the alternative—censorship—is equally discomfiting. The biopic CBS

axed was also insightful, in that it suggested Reagan was suffering from the onset of Alzheimer's disease while still occupying the Oval Office. It seems only a matter of time before historians recognize that keeping Reagan's mental condition secret will rank somewhere next to Edith Wilson's *de facto* role as the first woman president, i.e., running the White House after Woodrow Wilson had suffered an incapacitating stroke.

Holding filmmakers to a standard that historians struggle to achieve misunderstands the admittedly more powerful medium, and its antecedent, the theatrical play. As *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* points out, Laurence Olivier's 1944 film of Shakespeare's *Henry V* neglected to mention that the English king ordered the slaughter of hundreds of French prisoners at Agincourt. Yet no one protested Olivier's war-time rendering of Shakespeare's play (the great dramatist, interestingly, did not ignore the episode).

A written history may be fully accurate without being truthful—which come to think of it, is not a bad way of thinking about the 9/11 Commission's report. Films, on the other hand, distill and unavoidably mangle the past, even while the best ones manage to retain and convey the spirit of what happened. But attempting to censor them is ill advised. As Mark Carnes, the editor of *Past Imperfect*, told *The Washington Spectator*, "Filmmakers always manipulate the past to serve their own purposes. . . . Better to remind people incessantly that films are not history."

Postscript: According to a September 2007 [article](#) in the *Los Angeles Times*, the DVD version of *The Path to 9/11* has not been released because ABC and Disney executives fear stirring up more controversy. The DVD might remind Americans, at a time when Hillary Clinton is vying for the Democratic presidential nomination, of the Clinton administration's abject failure to protect the nation.