

# DETOURS OFF THE PATH TO 9/11

The truth is often  
the first casualty  
of war docudramas.



When I took on the assignment to write *The Path to 9/11* for ABC, I felt it was the most important and the most sensitive project that I, or any writer, could tackle. For that reason, and because of a deeply felt personal responsibility toward the story and those who died, I knew the research had to be impeccable. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, of course, was central, but other books were purchased, and many more referenced, along with personal interviews, articles, and an array of consultants. An entire staff of lawyers viewed and reviewed every scene, every bit of dialogue and action, both in the writing process and after it was shot. I would venture to say that no movie or miniseries has ever been so carefully vetted and, hence, as accurate in its presentation of a story that covers 8½ years, numerous continents, and 260 characters.

The one thing I did not do in preparing this project was to get the approval of politicians. Any politicians. I did not do it then, and I would not do it now. Why? Because if there is one batch of sources with a clear agenda, with clear partisanship, it would be politicians. The public deserves better than that. The victims of terrorism before 9/11 and since deserve better than that.

But, somehow, politicians injected themselves into this—in a big way. The spin-machine was out in full force against *The Path to 9/11*, long before it aired, and the media and others bought the spin. Just like book-burners have always done. The spinners mounted a witch hunt against me that knew no bounds. Far-left bloggers posted my home phone number and address on the Internet with the following message: “The gloves are off. Accidents occur.” As one would expect, the death threats and hate mail followed. The police visited my house twice, and the FBI called to follow up on the reports. An anchor of a major cable network show contacted a high school friend looking for dirt. With a few exceptions, most

of the TV and print media launched a libelous campaign to discredit me, led by the *Los Angeles Times*, which, in an attempt to provoke, ethnically profiled me as an “Iranian-American politically conservative Muslim.” Wrong on all but one count: I am an American.

The critical question that the media didn’t ask, that so many seem to have missed, is why were they so upset? Why mount such an unprecedented campaign against a movie before it airs? Why push so hard to get it pulled off the air? Why?

Maybe the truth had something to do with it.

## IN FACT...

The fact-checking on *The Path to 9/11* was of the highest standards. I would gladly put its veracity up against any docudrama ever made. Over Labor Day weekend, Disney/ABC brought in outside counsel to double-check the factual basis for the script (all 350 pages of annotations and their sources), and they concluded that it was rock-solid. I, and others, maintain that the minor cuts made in the show for broadcast were to mollify the unprecedented political machine out to kill the show. These minor cuts amounted to a little more than three minutes of screen time in a five-hour presentation—and they didn’t alter the intent or meaning of the scenes affected.

But the larger issue here—for writers, filmmakers, and artists—is the attack on the First Amendment perpetrated by the spinners. Senator Harry Reid and five other senators sent a letter to Disney/ABC threatening revocation of their station licenses if they did not pull or recut the movie. Congresswoman Louise Slaughter spoke on the House floor, suggesting that they need to “consider the backgrounds of the people behind this.” These outrageous statements, made before the miniseries aired, were uttered by people who freely admitted that they had not seen it but had only heard what was in the

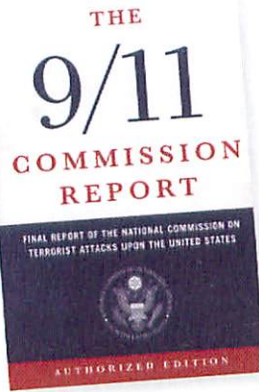
**“OUR AIM HAS NOT BEEN TO ASSIGN INDIVIDUAL BLAME. OUR AIM HAS BEEN TO PROMOTE THE FULLEST POSSIBLE ACCOUNT OF THE EVENTS SURROUNDING 9/11 AND TO IDENTIFY LESSONS LEARNED. IN AN EVENT OF THIS SCALE, TOUCHING SO MANY ISSUES AND ORGANIZATIONS, WE ARE CONSCIOUS OF OUR LIMITS.”**

**—THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT**

movie. In other words, rumor was their basis, censorship their goal.

The tactics of these Washington lawmakers—and their supporters—are no less than the tools of modern McCarthyism, something historians are keen to study as long as it’s 50 years ago. MoveOn.org sent out e-mails demanding the movie be “yanked” and accusing me of being a “right-wing activist who fabricated key scenes to blame Democrats and defend Republicans.” Anyone who has seen the movie knows this last claim is ridiculous. We are just

as hard on the Bush administration failures as we are on those of the Clinton administration. In effect, the movie is an equal-opportunity offender—but if you followed the spin and didn’t see it, you might be persuaded like a recent POV columnist who called me a propagandist and fictionalizer. I remember a time when writers stood up for one another’s creative rights. In fact, no one stood up for this movie—not the ACLU, the WGA, PEN, the DGA—no organizations devoted to artists’ rights spoke up. After all, we’d been charac-



terized as “right-wing fanatics”—who in Hollywood would defend such?

As for characterizing me as a right-winger, I’m the guy who wrote and directed *The Day Reagan Was Shot*, which portrayed the Reagan administration in chaos, for which the movie was viciously attacked by conservatives. I also wrote *10,000 Black Men Named George*, whose hero, A. Philip Randolph, was a notorious African-American Communist who leads the movie’s union struggles. I won the PEN award for both of these films, and PEN is not known for being partial to conservatives. Just for the record, I am not now and never have been, nor will ever be, a member of any political party. The chief reason: to protect my writing from any ideological censorship either internally or externally imposed.

Hysteria has no oxygen for facts or truth. One of the more illustrative examples of this was CNN’s Wolf Blitzer and a panel condemning the movie

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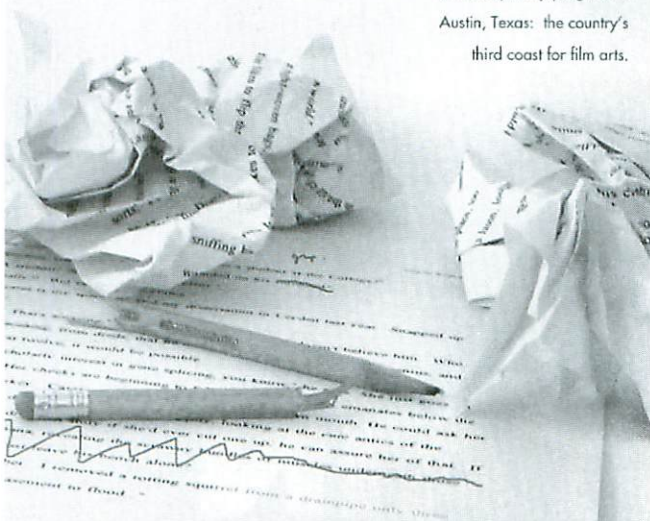
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when none of them had seen it—hence we had former Defense Secretary William Cohen and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright responding to questions about a scene that did not exist.

In fact, after watching the miniseries the following people came out publicly in support of it:

- Michael Scheuer, former chief of the Osama bin Laden unit at the CIA's counterterrorist center and clearly no fan of either the Bush or Clinton administrations nor the 9/11 Commission, e-mailed ABC News to insist that "the core of the movie is irrefutably true."

- Gary Schroen, former CIA field agent who was the first American into Afghanistan after 9/11, said publicly that "the movie is remarkably accurate."

- Lt. Col. Robert Patterson, chief White House military aide to President Clinton, said "in terms of conveying how the Clinton administration handled its opportunities to get Bin Laden, it's 100 percent factually correct." Patterson declared, "I was there with Clinton and [National Security Advisor Sandy] Berger and watched the missed opportunities occur."

- Steven Emerson, one of the foremost terrorism experts in the world, a man who has testified and briefed Congress dozens of times on terrorism, said that "*The Path to 9/11* is 100 percent accurate."

### The Terror Next Time

The individuals above, speaking to the veracity of *The Path to 9/11*, are not politicians "spinning"—they were there, and some still are, fighting the war on terror. They know what happened. The facts of the matter and the truth they reveal are not just so much political currency, no matter how loud the politicians or media pundits scream otherwise. *The Path to 9/11* is just the messenger.

No more, no less.

Sadly, the hysteria distracted from that message, the one and only "agenda." From the first day to the last, it was a simple one: to enact in historically accurate fashion that 9/11 was merely one more step in an escalating pattern of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism against the U.S. To remind the public of recent history. To place 9/11 in context. To illustrate the trajectory of attacks. To connect the proverbial dots of the past in the hope that we can connect them better in the future.

Not a day goes by even now where I don't run across some reference to it written in ignorance by someone who swallows whole what the election-crazed politicians dish out. Also, not a day goes by where I am not thanked personally by a neighbor, an acquaintance, a colleague, or a stranger. Regardless what the media, the politicians, the perpetually outraged bloggers, or even many in the film community think, this project was a privilege from start to finish. And I stand by every word of it. **WB**