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■ **Movie review**

'WMD' loses strength in scattershot approach

Danny Schechter's "Weapons of Mass Deception" is critical of the war, but more so of media coverage

BY RYAN NYBURG
PULSE EDITOR

The current presidential administration has long claimed that the "Mission Accomplished" banner seen during the famous flightsuit press conference was a spontaneous show of support from the troops stationed on the USS Abraham Lincoln. What is not mentioned is that cameramen onboard the ship were not allowed to shoot the president from any angle that did not show the banner behind him. There is no criticism inherent in my pointing this out. It's just an example of press manipulation, the sort any intelligent administration would use.

Since the release of "Fahrenheit 9/11" there has been a slew of documentaries both criticizing and/or supporting the administration and/or the conservative media. For the first twenty minutes or so, "Weapons of Mass Deception" seems to be another wave in this endless barrage of

right- and left-wing polemics and senseless political aggrandizing. But after that first twenty minutes it begins to become something different.

"WMD" was created by Danny Schechter, a long-time media critic, author and reporter. Schechter's view on the war becomes immediately apparent with his opening, a cheesy homage to "Apocalypse Now." In a way this turns out to be helpful because it gives the viewer a chance to understand where Schechter is coming from. He is critical of the war, but not nearly as critical as he is of the American news media that covered the war.

Schechter documents the way broadcast and print journalists covered the aftermath of September 11, 2001, in a way that was highly favorable for the administration, asking few questions and mostly cheer-leading the way for an invasion. He also covers how the administration began using PR and marketing

tactics to handle the media, presenting the war as a product to sell. They create a simple, black-and-white story line for reporters to follow and sell it to them using basic marketing tactics, framing the message to suit their purposes.

The film does not criticize the administration for using these tactics, but views it more as a given. If you want to manipulate news coverage in your favor, this is how to do it. What you are trying to accomplish is beside the point. The news outlets, on the other hand, are lambasted for their lack of objectivity and perspective. Facts are rolled out that accuse the major news networks of massive errors of journalistic judgment. Fox owner Rupert Murdoch paid Saddam Hussein's administration \$500,000 to allow reporters to operate in Iraq before the war. NBC parent company General Electric received \$600 million in Iraq reconstruction bids from the Bush administration. And so on it goes.

The film really picks up during its discussion of the journalist

embedding program that took place during the initial invasion. In Schechter's view, the program was an ingenious way to control the press. Reporters develop personal connections with the troops they cover, making it difficult to criticize them or their actions. At one point in the film it is mentioned that the whole idea was a breach of journalistic ethics, since it is wrong to accept anything of value from the people you cover, which these reporters certainly did.

In the end, the documentary is an interesting piece of media criticism, though often is too scattershot and repetitive to have a strong effect. That most of the information it presents has been shown too often by too many other documentaries doesn't help matters. But as a critique of news coverage, it makes for at least an engaging 98 minutes.

"Weapons of Mass Deception" will be shown as part of the Bijou Art Cinemas' late night program on Feb. 18 through Feb. 20.

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Random House seeks repayment from Sean Combs

BY HILLEL ITALIE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Random House Inc. is suing Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, alleging that the hip-hop mogul never paid back a \$300,000 advance for a memoir he never completed.

In papers filed Monday at the state Supreme Court in Manhattan, the publisher alleged that Combs and his

corporation, Bad Boy, have "simply kept the money they never rightfully earned." Random House is seeking the advance's return, plus interest.

"Random House has seldom resorted to a legal course of action with its prospective authors who don't write the books we have contracted for, but Mr. Sean Combs has left us no choice," the publisher said in a

statement Tuesday.

Combs' publicist, Rob Shuter, said Tuesday there was a "disagreement with Random House that we hoped would be resolved without litigation. We anticipate that this will be resolved quickly."

According to the court papers, Combs signed with Random House in 1998 and then arranged on his

own to collaborate with Mikal Gilmore, a contributing editor to Rolling Stone and author of the acclaimed "Shot in the Heart." A manuscript was to be completed by Dec. 15, 1999, but the deadline passed and, in early 2000, Random House notified Combs that he was in breach of contract and that the publisher wanted the money back.

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