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ARTS AND LEISURE DESK

3 Hours, 4 Nights, 1 Fear

By FRANK RICH (NYT) 1808 words

YOU can't blame the broadcast networks for cutting their convention coverage to a fig-leaf minimum of just three hours of prime time spread over four nights. That's what both parties deserve for having steadily sanded down their quadrennial celebrations into infomercials with all the spark and spontaneity of the televised Yule Log. But though few want to say so aloud, there is one potential last-minute ingredient that would instantly bring back gavel-to-gavel coverage on the Big Three: a terrorist attack. That fearful possibility is both conventions' sole claim to suspense.

It is also the subtext of this entire presidential campaign. A late-June USA Today/CNN poll shows that 55 percent of Americans feel less safe because of the war in Iraq -- a figure that has spiked 22 points in merely six months. Fear rules. Fear rocks. Fear of terrorism is George W. Bush's only second-term platform to date (unless you count fear of same-sex marriage). Let John F. Kerry roll out John Edwards as his running mate, and Tom Ridge rushes to grab back the TV spotlight by predicting that Al Qaeda will "disrupt our democratic process." Never mind that he had no "precise knowledge" of such an attack or any plans to raise his color-coded threat level; his real mission, to wield fear as a weapon of mass distraction, had been accomplished. Odds are that the next John Ashcroft doomsday press conference will be timed to coincide with the run-up to Mr. Kerry's acceptance speech on Thursday night.

In the fear game, the Democrats are the visiting team, playing at a serious disadvantage. Out of power, they can't suit up officials at will to go on camera to scare us. Mr. Kerry is reduced instead to incessantly repeating the word "strength" and promising to put "a national coordinator for nuclear terrorism" in the cabinet. That will hardly cut it against these ingenious opponents. Every time a Bush administration official tells us the apocalypse is coming, the president himself brags that he has made America "safer." The message is in the bad news-good news contradiction: the less safe we feel, the more likely we'll play it safe on Election Day by sticking with the happy face we know.

Yet the Democrats still can't be counted out. They do have one card to play that the Republicans do not: pop culture. With a vengeance that recalls the Clinton-hating echo chamber when it was fantasizing about the "murder" of Vincent Foster, big guns in the culture industry are rousing themselves into a war-room frenzy of anti-Bush hysteria that goes well beyond fielding an inept talk-radio network and producing documentaries for the base at MoveOn.org. Their method for countering the Bush-Cheney monopolization of fear is to turn the administration into an object of fear in its own right. It can be seen at full throttle in Jonathan Demme's remake of the classic cold war thriller, "The Manchurian Candidate," which opens nationally on Friday, the morning after the Democratic convention ends. This movie could pass for the de facto fifth day of the convention itself.

I cannot recall when Hollywood last released a big-budget mainstream feature film as partisan as this one at the

height of a presidential campaign. That it has slipped into action largely under the media's radar, as discreetly as the sleeper agents in its plot, is an achievement in itself. Freed from any obligations to fact, "The Manchurian Candidate" can play far dirtier than "Fahrenheit 9/11." Not being a documentary, it can also open on far more screens -- some 2,800, which is more than three times what Michael Moore could command on his opening weekend (or any weekend to date).

"The Manchurian Candidate" is a product of Paramount Pictures, whose chairwoman, Sherry Lansing, is a loyal Democratic contributor, according to public records. (So, for the most part, is her boss, the Viacom chairman, Sumner Redstone.) One of the film's stars, Meryl Streep, shared the stage with Whoopi Goldberg at the recent Kerry-Edwards fund-raiser. As Bill O'Reilly will be glad to hear, the cameo role of a cable-news reporter is played by Al Franken.

The screenplay has holes as large as those in our still woefully inadequate homeland security apparatus. (At the outset the film actually posits that political conventions are exciting events where even the vice presidential nomination can still be up for grabs.) Hokey, literal-minded sci-fi gimmickry usurps the wit of the 1962 original, which was faithfully adapted by the director John Frankenheimer and the screenwriter George Axelrod from the 1959 Richard Condon novel. But the new version, even at its clunkiest, could not be more uncompromising in its paranoid portrayal of a political cartel with certain familiar traits that will stop at nothing, including the exploitation and even the fomenting of terrorism, to hold on to power for its corporate backers.

The original "Manchurian Candidate" was both anti-Communist and anti-Joe McCarthy. It theorized that the Chinese and Russians could try to overthrow the American government by using covert Washington operatives disguised as Commie-hunting American demagogues. The new "Candidate," which takes the first gulf war instead of the Korean War as its historical template, finds a striking new international villain to replace the extinct evil empires of Mao and Stalin: Manchurian Global, a "supremely powerful, well-connected, private equity fund" that is in league with the Saudis and eager to scoop up the profits from privatizing the American Army. Think of it as the Carlyle Group or Halliburton on steroids, just as its primary fictional political beneficiary, the well-heeled "Prentiss family dynasty," with its three generations of Washington influence, is at most one syllable removed from the Bushes.

Perhaps to fake out the right, the villain played by Ms. Streep has been given the look, manner and senatorial rank of Hillary Clinton. (The character's invective, typified by her accusation that civil libertarians enable suicide bombers, is vintage Fox News Channel, blond auxiliary division.) She has programmed her son to be the "first privately owned and operated vice president of the United States" -- in other words, the left's demonized image of the current vice president. This conspiracy unfolds in a sinister present-day America where surveillance cameras track library visitors, cable news channels peddle apocalypse 24/7, and the American government launches pre-emptive military strikes in countries like Guinea to prolong a war on terror "with no end in sight." The crucial election at hand will use electronic touch screens for voting, a dark intimation of Floridian balloting mischief. It will not be an election at all, says the movie's military-man hero (Denzel Washington in Colin Powell's rimless specs), but "a coup -- in our own country, a regime change."

The first "Manchurian Candidate" was, famously, a box-office flop. But it labored under two handicaps that its remake does not. Its premiere was just two days into the Cuban missile crisis, a terrifying real-life drama that would have dwarfed any fictional big-screen scenario of Communist malevolence. And daring as it was by Hollywood standards, the first "Manchurian Candidate" was not exactly on top of the news. McCarthy was not only dead by 1962 but had been out of power since his censure by the Senate in 1954.

It's a fool's errand to predict the commercial success of the remake. If it's a hit -- always a big if -- the audience will be larger, more politically diverse and, given the stars, older (and therefore more likely to vote) than that of "Fahrenheit 9/11." The film carries too much show-business establishment freight to be easily marginalized as a fringe product of the "loony left," as it surely will be by the same crowd who inflated Whoopi Goldberg's tasteless sexual innuendos into a "hatefest." Dismiss the movie's plot as an over-the-top fantasy and you're still left with a foreboding mood of high anxiety that may strike audiences as recognizably up-to-the-minute.

That atmosphere is one of sheer fear; Mr. Demme was, after all, the director of "The Silence of the Lambs." "The

American people are terrified," says Ms. Streep's villainous senator early on as, John Ashcroft-style, she wields a national security report promising "another cataclysm, probably nuclear." And so we watch her and the rest of the Manchurian Global cabal exploit that fear in any way possible, using the mass media as a brainwashing tool, manipulating patriotic iconography for political ends. "Compassionate vigilance" is one campaign slogan. A televised election night rally features a Mount Rushmore backdrop (as in a signature Bush photo op) and a chorus line of heroic cops and firemen (reminiscent of the early Bush-Cheney ads exploiting the carnage at ground zero).

The new "Manchurian Candidate," in other words, plays by the same nasty rules as the administration it attacks, stoking fear for partisan advantage by making the demagogues of fear almost as scary as the terrorists themselves. Though the terminally cautious Kerry campaign would never make this argument, its cultural surrogates are bringing it to an expanding variety of venues, high and low.

In the weeks before the Republican convention, Alfred A. Knopf, fresh from its merchandising triumph with Bill Clinton's "My Life," will release Nicholson Baker's incendiary vest-pocket-size novel, "Checkpoint," in which a politically ambidextrous protagonist (he hates both abortion and Dick Cheney) lays out a case for assassinating the president. (It, too, includes a reference to "The Manchurian Candidate.") Stars as big and demographically disparate as Howard Stern (whose radio ratings have risen since he started vilifying the "fascist right wing") and the chart-topping rapper Jadakiss (whose single "Why" suggests that Mr. Bush knocked down the twin towers) are making the Dixie Chicks look like Young Republicans. On his current crosscountry tour, Ozzy Osbourne is aping a recent Bush-Cheney ad's blending of a shouting Hitler with images of Al Gore and Michael Moore by just as crudely juxtaposing the Führer's face with the president's. "The crowd didn't seem to mind," reported The New York Times's Ben Ratliff in his eyewitness account of one of the Ozzfest's recent dates in suburban New York.

You will, of course, see none of this at the Democratic convention, where "optimism" will be the default setting and even Mr. Kerry will once more, heaven help him and us, attempt to smile. That's why the networks, not to mention most viewers, are staying away. But starting on Friday at a theater near you, fear will be back in the driver's seat of a ruthless campaign in which the battle over our nightmares about Al Qaeda will be bloody and decisive whether Al Qaeda itself is heard from or not.

CAPTIONS: Photo: Hollywood's new Manchuria: The former President George H. W. Bush, working for the Carlyle Group, with King Fahd, right, in 2000. (Photo by Saudi Arabian Embassy)(pg. 22)

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