Bowling for Kennebunkport

By FRANK RICH

POLITICS abhors a vacuum. Entertainers love center stage. And so it was only too predictable that once the Democratic party's marquee names proved M.I.A. during the White House march to war, show business's stars would answer the call, whether anyone wanted them to or not.

The ensuing cavalcade has been entertaining in its way, if not exactly edifying. "I keep asking myself where all this personal enmity between George Bush and Saddam Hussein came from," said Richard Gere in February. (Maybe it was time for him to start asking someone else.) "I just really hope we all are in agreement [sic] that this war should go away," announced Fred Durst, the lead singer of Limp Bizkit, at the Grammys. Sean Penn toured prewar Baghdad, then purported to be victimized by a resurgence of "the dark era of Hollywood blacklisting" once he was dumped from a movie project in a contract dispute. (Never mind that the producer who "blacklisted" him, Steve Bing, is a major donor to the Democrats.) Martin Sheen was last seen at a Los Angeles vigil with duct tape emblazoned "Peace" over his mouth. Alas, we shall not see Madonna's long-awaited "American Life" video, whose premiere she abruptly canceled on Monday. According to an MTV News report, "the first and most obvious" statement the star had wanted to make about American life was "that regardless of whether or not she supports Bush, war is a cosmic bummer."

It is times like these that have prompted John McCain to observe, "If Washington is a Hollywood for ugly people, Hollywood is a Washington for the simple-minded." The ubiquitous comedian Janeane Garofalo complains that the media are deliberately focusing on antiwar actors to brand the entire antiwar movement as silly. Everywhere you turn there are sightings of a nationwide backlash against celebrities, with Exhibit A being Natalie Maines, the Dixie Chicks head chick who was driven by radio-station boycotts to apologize for dissing George W. Bush at a London concert.

Exhibit B in this supposed backlash is the morality tale of the Oscars. In its unvaried retelling, this was a pristine decorous night until Michael Moore came along. Not content to keep with the down-low program of political activism typified by Susan Sarandon flashing a pro forma peace sign and Barbra Streisand congratulating the nation for having the First Amendment, he crashed and burned with his shouts of "Shame on you, Mr. Bush!"

Well, there were boos. But the filmmaker was not hearing them. "When you look at the tape, no one is booing on the main floor," Mr. Moore said when I caught up with him nearly a week later in New York. He attributes the ruckus largely to a shouting match that broke out between scattered boosers and his own partisans. But he is not only unrepentant about calling Mr. Bush a fictitious president, he is busy toting up his subsequent good fortune. Box office for "Bowling for Columbine," already the longest-running commercial movie in current release and the highest-grossing documentary in history, was up by more than 100 percent on the Monday after Oscar night. His book "Stupid White Men," already the largest nonfiction best seller of 2002, is reclaiming the No. 1 slot on the Times best-seller list today.

"I don't think there's a backlash or a blacklist or anything like that going on," he said, "and I'd be the first to point it out if I thought it was." He has a point. If Mr. Sheen is encountering turbulence with network executives, it is probably not because of his views about the war, as he has insinuated, but because of the slippage in "West Wing" ratings. For all the tumult about the Dixie Chicks, their sales remain strong, with "Home" actually moving up the pop-sales chart, from No. 6 to No. 4 during last month's ruckus, according to Entertainment Weekly. The group's spring tour is virtually sold out, as I discovered by trying to find a seat for such venues as Greenville, S.C., and Tampa, Fla., through Ticketmaster. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that if you tell a free people they can't hear something, read something or see something, they are going to want to see, read and hear it all the more," said Mr. Moore. "So please, boycott the Dixie Chicks, try to start a boycott of Michael Moore, and watch what happens."

Bush loyalists, of course, take a different view. Having bought into the myth that the Dixie Chicks are as easy to defeat as Saddam Hussein's troops, they are now busily consigning Mr. Moore to oblivion. "He'll probably be doing industrial training films in a couple of years and nobody ever will hear of him again," predicted Fred Thompson, whose own agreeable career as a character
actor, whether as a Republican pitchman in his Senate salad days or more recently on "Law and Order," has yet to earn him an Oscar, Emmy or presidential nomination. The Fox News ticker on Sixth Avenue recently flashed the "news" headline: "Attention protesters: the Michael Moore Fan Club meets Thursday at a phone booth at Sixth Avenue and 50th Street."

To Mr. Moore, the "virtual insanity" he has provoked in "the Bill O'Reillys and others" on the right is an indication that he, unlike many of his fellow showbiz antirwar protesters, has actually drawn blood. That's a shock to the conservative system. Liberals have been so lame in battling on the mass media's turf that Democratic fat cats in February ponied up $10 million to finance a talk-show radio network that will field hosts to counter Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. Yet Mr. Moore, without a talk show, may be just the lethal heat-seeking show-business weapon they have been looking for. It's telling that conservatives who deride him as a big, fat idiot sound as worried about Mr. Moore as liberals were about Mr. Limbaugh when he began his rise to superstardom.

Like Mr. Limbaugh at his least grandiose best, Mr. Moore's persona is more funny than angry, more everyman than show-biz. He is not, as he puts it, "a didactic, wimpy kind of liberal" — one of those whiners that makes audiences reach for the remote faster than you can say "Phil Donahue." Mr. Moore may not be subtle as a filmmaker or a polemicist, but the grandstanding glee of his broad strokes is precisely what makes him succeed as a showman. "Bowling for Columbine," with its wild (and sometimes dubious) leaps of logic and Kubrickesque juxtapositions of grim content (carnage-filled newsreels) with humorous trappings (Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World") makes a seemingly shopworn liberal gripe (the American culture of violence) seem like a lark. The film has a tone closer to that of the Christopher Guest school of "documentary" — Mr. Moore cites "This Is Spinal Tap" as a favorite — than to the fastidious oeuvre of Frederick Wiseman.

Mr. Moore's boorish Oscar night yelling, far from relegating him to obscurity, seems to have enhanced not only his movie's box office but his own magnitude of stardom. While Hollywood and its acolytes may believe that Mr. Moore was (in that now terminally overused word) "inappropriate," there may well be plenty of other Americans who find it more mischievous than scandalous to break etiquette at a glitzy awards show. Upending a ceremony at which the high priest is Steve Martin is not, after all, an act of sacrilege quite on a par with disrupting high mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

AT a time when polls show that most Americans support the war and the president, Mr. Moore goes so far as to argue that his contrarian position is "reflective of where the majority of Americans are." To support this questionable supposition, he harks back to the prewar polls in which more than half the country opposed a pre-emptive war without the approval of the United Nations and our allies. And so he lies in wait for the postwar President Bush to re-enact his father's post-Gulf War slide in time for the 2004 election. By then, Mr. Moore will have brought out a new book and a projected TV series (likely to land on HBO) and possibly appeared in his own Broadway show.

His next film, titled "Fahrenheit 911," is scheduled for release in the two months before Election Day. It tells "in part the story of twin errant sons of different oilmen," he says, and will stir together the pre-9/11 intersection of Bush and bin Laden family business interests when both had ties to the Carlyle Group. Such connections "may mean nothing," Mr. Moore concedes. But then he recalls Jane Mayer's article in the November 2001 New Yorker about the private Saudi jet that the Bush administration permitted to fly 24 members of the bin Laden family out of the country after 9/11, before they could be questioned in detail by the F.B.I. "Here's one question I want to pose," he says. "What if on the day after Oklahoma City, Bill Clinton, suddenly worried about the safety of the McVeigh family up in Buffalo, allowed a jet to pick them all up and take them out of the country, not to return?" You can already fantasize how Mr. Moore, once he is turned away from the White House, might travel to Kennebunkport to pursue the first President Bush in retirement much as he did Charlton Heston in "Bowling for Columbine."

This may sound unfair, but is it any more so than the rhetorical grenades that right-wing performers like Bill O'Reilly and Ann Coulter lob at liberal targets? In America, at least, all is fair not only in love and war but also in entertainment. If Mr. Moore forgets his pact with the audience and makes a habit of preaching as he did on Oscar night, he might as well seal his own mouth with duct tape. But if he ambushes America with humor 16 months from now, he may be more of a factor in the next election cycle than all the other, more glamorous Oscar attendees now lining up at fund-raisers for Howard Dean.