



Old news footage from *CSA: The Confederate States of America*

## REBEL HELL

### *CSA: The Confederate States of America*

review by M. Faust

Inspired by Ken Burns' PBS documentary "The Civil War" and Hollywood's general refusal to tackle the issue of slavery, *CSA: The Confederate States of America* is an ersatz documentary on American history that begins with the premise that the South won the Civil War.

In the script by writer-director Kevin Willmott, Confederate diplomats persuade European armies to join their side by persuading them that the war is being fought over the right to own and control private property. Like most of the film, this is a "what-if" scenario grounded in reality: The South did try to get Europe into the war and almost succeeded.

Armed with commentary from a pair of talking-head academic historians, Willmott condenses the next 140 years of history into 90 minutes that are alternately hilarious and provocative for the light they shine onto some of the darker aspects of the American soul. After exacting the same revenge on northern cities that General Sherman did on Atlanta, the Confederacy does not secede but instead takes over, changing the United States into the Confederate States. Lincoln is exiled to Canada and dies a bitter old man, though at least before witnessing his caricature in D. W. Griffith's film *The Hunt For Dishonest Abe* (presumably what Griffith made instead of *Birth of a Nation* in this world where, just as in ours, history is written by the victors).

*CSA* remains as true as possible to the history we know to show how our world might have been warped by the continuance of slavery. The introduction of slave labor to the north is accomplished by tax pressure, causing most of the intellectuals and artists of the day to move to Canada. The *CSA* expands both westward—where Chinese laborers are also enslaved—and southward, colonizing Latin America, whose citizens are allowed their freedom under an apartheid-like system. A national religion is declared. By the time the 1930s roll around, the *CSA* is happy to back the

Nazis, advising Hitler only that it would be less "wasteful" to enslave Jews rather than exterminating them.

What gives the film a real satirical bite is its frame. *CSA* is presented in the form of a British documentary being shown—with much self-congratulatory fanfare regarding its controversial nature—on an American television network. The show is periodically interrupted by commercials selling products used by a culture in which slavery is an ongoing practice, and in which racial prejudice has only grown stronger. Some are subtler than others: In the insurance ad that opens *CSA*, notice how the pitch to preserve your family and property focuses during the latter term on the black gardener. But that doesn't make the promos for a "Cops"-like TV show called "Runaways," or the cable TV "Slave Shopping Network" any less pointed.

And the ads that seem the most over-the-top—a restaurant called the "Coon Chicken Inn," "Niggerhair tobacco," "Darky toothpaste"—are all in fact for real products that were sold within our lifetimes.

Both a critique of America's racist history and an exposé of the "market-driven" philosophies that make the exploitation of human beings possible, *CSA* is a low-budget film—Willmott is an assistant professor of film at the University of Kansas—whose reach sometimes exceeds its grasp: Anything more complicated than the parodic commercials has an air of cheapness to it. A bigger problem may be that it's too smart for its own good; some of the subtler jokes may be lost on mass audiences, while Willmott's path through the 20th century is wide-ranging enough to make us wish he had more time to tease his premise out even more.

***CSA* will be shown Wednesday and Thursday, March 8 and 9, on the Emerging Cinema screen at the Market Arcade Film and Arts Center, 639 Main St.**



President Dwight D. Eisenhower film footage in *Why We Fight*

## IKE WAS RIGHT

### *Why We Fight*

review by Michael I. Niman

Every U.S. bomber and jet fighter kills people, even if it never leaves the ground. The people it kills are Americans. This warning, in essence, comes from Republican former president Dwight D. Eisenhower who pointed out how many hospitals or schools could be built for the cost of one plane. Today each and every missile lobbed into an Iraqi or Afghani neighborhood represents an untold number of Americans without health care, without decent schools, without housing and so on. As we vaporize "enemy" communities, we also economically decimate our own. But war is in our culture. We're addicted to fighting. If we weren't bogged down in Iraq, we'd be in Iran, Cuba, Venezuela or Bolivia.

Documentary filmmaker Eugene Jarecki confronts this pivotal question that cuts to the core of the American ethos with his latest work, *Why We Fight*, winner of the 2005 Sundance Film Festival's Grand Jury Prize. Jarecki begins and ends the film with President Eisenhower's now classic 1961 farewell address to the nation, where he coined the phrase, "military industrial complex."

War is a business. And it's a profitable business, with arms manufacturing the United States' number one export industry. This was Eisenhower's warning. To meet the challenges of World War II, American industry re-tooled for war. The ensuing Cold War made this shift permanent: padding the pockets of weapons manufacturers who, in turn, invested heavily in American elections, helping elect leaders who, in turn, guaranteed perpetual war and an endless flow of money to war contractors who, in turn, continued to pad the pockets of warmongering politicians. By the time Eisenhower retired from politics this cycle had accelerated into a tornado.

*Why We Fight* examines the business of war. Jarecki interviews Beltway insiders and critics from across the political spectrum, talking to people like Republican Senator John McCain, former CIA operative Chambers Johnson, author Gore Vidal and neo-fascists Richard Perle of the American Enterprise Institute and William Kristol of the Project for a New American Century. *Why We Fight* goes beyond the question of why we are in Iraq. It asks why have we been at war for the past half century. Why do we have troops stationed in more than 120 countries? Why were we involved in attacks against Guate-

mala, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Vietnam, Chile, Grenada, Haiti and so on. Why can't we play nice with others?

The answer, after an hour and a half of introspection, comes back to Eisenhower's military industrial complex. Take the B-2 bomber. It has at least one piece manufactured in every single American state. Hence, cutting the B-2 program means layoffs in every state. This translates into elected representatives having to defend themselves against charges of voting to cut jobs in their own districts if they voted to cut B-2 funding. The strategy is brilliant—and it guarantees perpetual production of military hardware. War consumes the hardware, keeping the industrial-electoral machine greased. Military industrial complex—it's the addiction to war.

Of course, the same strategy would work with, for example, wind turbines. If the wind energy industry dominated government, and if they applied similar strategies to grease the political process, we'd have energy independence and green energy. The problem is we didn't build up for renewable energy in the 1940s. We geared up for war. Blame Hitler if you will. The juggernaut got rolling and the rest is history.

Eisenhower warned us that the military industrial complex would eventually grow to threaten that which it ostensibly exists to defend—our increasingly fragile democracy. *Why We Fight* does an excellent job of following up on Eisenhower's warning and putting it into a contemporary context. Like the recent documentary masterpiece *The Corporation*, *Why We Fight* is comprehensive, but at times it runs on like a classroom video, hammering us with an endless stream of details about the business of war. Unlike *The Corporation* and other recently successful political documentaries, however, it's almost devoid of humor. But war is serious business, and Jarecki puts the emphasis on the business end of it. Few Americans really know why we're constantly at war, why we fight. For them, this film is a must see.

*Dr. Michael I. Niman is an Artvoice columnist, Buffalo State College Professor, and partner in Niagara Independent Media which operates AM 1270 radio, The Voice of Reason.*