



Blood money Three movies explore why the US is broke By Dennis Harvey

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Most Americans are fairly sure they are being screwed where it hurts most: in the wallet. But if they think they know why, it's usually a red herring, while the actual primary causes of shrinking financial stability remain obscured by propaganda, media inattention, and institutional stonewalling. By timely coincidence, three worthwhile documentaries opening this week shine some light on the matter. One profiles a longtime champion of consumer protection, while the others examine two realms in which lack of regulation is letting our dollars dance off a cliff of corporate profiteering and dubious ethics.

An Unreasonable Man is Henriette Mantel and Stephen Skrovan's admiring yet critical portrait of Ralph Nader. The previous century's most famous consumer advocate racked up a roster of triumphs that protected citizens against corporations — that is, until Ronald Reagan commenced ongoing deregulation trends. Famously starting with auto design safety in the early '60s, then encompassing pollution, food and drug guidelines, nuclear power, the insurance industry, and workplace risk-protection, Nader did enough public good during his career — with worldwide legislative ripple effects — to merit secular sainthood. Then he decided to run for president, in 2000, as a Green. He won just enough votes for many Democrats to blame him for the catastrophic ascent of George W. Bush. Needless to say, the latter is no friend of Nader's consumerist lobbying, which suffered a defection of support from nearly all quarters.

Lengthy but engrossing, *An Unreasonable Man* wants to reclaim Nader's legacy, even as it admits that his black-or-white morality can be both admirable and mulishly exasperating. After all, in the end he didn't rob Al Gore of the Oval Office: with familial help from the Sunshine State, Bush stole it.

If the current climate had allowed Nader's Raiders as much clout as they had under the Jimmy Carter administration, could Americans possibly have been led into the shithole examined by *Maxed Out*? James Scurlock's survey of the out-of-control credit and debt industry begins by informing viewers that this year "more Americans will go bankrupt than will divorce, graduate college, or get cancer."

Of course, thanks to our current president, they won't be able to declare bankruptcy anymore — the lazy sods! Instead they can enjoy a lifetime of astronomical interest rates, threats, and continued solicitations to sign up for yet more loans and plastic.

Maxed Out includes personal stories of housewives driven to suicide, longtime homeowners tricked into foreclosure, and even underpaid soldiers targeted for exploitation by creditors after Iraq tours. The movie's institutional focus spotlights the deliberate holding of customer checks until late fees can be charged (an executive from one company guilty of such tactics was Bush's pick for financial-industries czar), spinelessness on the part of government investigative committees, and flat-out collusion by many politicians. Meanwhile, the national debt goes up and up, in good part owing to Iraq, making it unlikely that Social Security or basic social services will be around in the future.

Speaking of Iraq and bottomless money pits, for the first time in any major conflict, a great share of US military expenditure now goes to private security contractors. In less linguistically evasive times we called them mercenaries, or soldiers of fortune. Who are these people, and who are they accountable to? Nick Bicanic and Jason Bourque's *Shadow Company* is a well-crafted grasp at answers, though that latter question is a hard one. Some of the people interviewed in the movie sound conscientious enough, and as some grisly footage attests, the risks they run are no joke. More private contractees have been killed in Iraq than all non-US military personnel put together. But the booming \$1 billion-a-year industry of private military companies (PMCs) doesn't operate under any strict guidelines.

We've already outsourced the running of many prisons and schools to private concerns. When war itself is a for-hire endeavor — and a hot job market, since PMC employees' salaries dwarf those of actual soldiers — is there any doubt left that we're fighting for venture capitalism, not democracy? *

AN UNREASONABLE MAN

www.anunreasonableman.com

MAXED OUT

www.maxedoutmovie.com

SHADOW COMPANY

www.shadowcompanythemovie.com

All three films open Fri/9 at Bay Area theaters

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