



# Movin' on

It started on a computer screen in Berkeley. Today, MoveOn has become a nationwide movement, rallying millions of liberal political activists via the Internet.

By Pamela Burdman

**T**he last weekend in June was an emblematic episode in the life of MoveOn. The advocacy group had decided to put its muscle behind filmmaker Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11," after the movie was attacked by right-wing groups for its anti-Bush message. A single email from MoveOn organizers the previous week had prompted more than 100,000 members to pledge to see the controversial film on opening night.

But as animated audiences lined up at sold-out screens around the country to see the MoveOn-endorsed movie, TV news programs in some areas were giving equal time to a different take on the liberal-minded organization: a George W. Bush-Dick Cheney ad dubbed "Coalition of the Wild-Eyed." The attack ad against presidential candidate John Kerry strung together angry outbursts from former vice president Al Gore, one-time Democratic presidential hopeful Howard Dean and



In an unprecedented use of the Web, MoveOn held an Internet contest inviting members to design an anti-Bush political ad. The winner, "Child's Pay" by Charlie Fisher of Denver, has run nationwide.

## Guess who's going to pay off President Bush's \$1 trillion deficit?

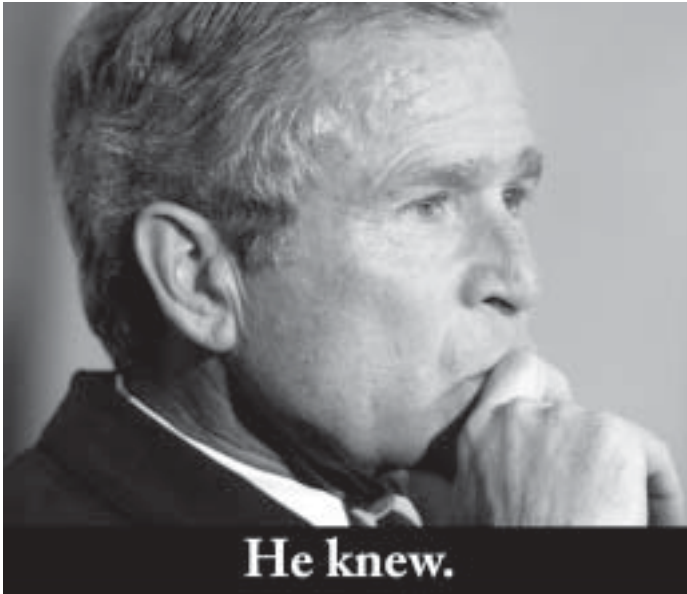
Moore himself, along with images of Adolf Hitler attributed to MoveOn.

The Hitler reference was obscure. In January, when MoveOn held a "Bush in 30 Seconds" contest to design a political ad, two of the 1,500 entries submitted to the group's Web site likened President Bush to the Nazi leader. Though the spots were removed from the site within days and MoveOn founder Wes Boyd dismissed them as "poor taste," the Bush ad tagged the images as the product of MoveOn. A convoluted message, to be sure, but one seemed clearly calculated to detract from the anti-Bush message playing inside theatres with the group's blessing.

MoveOn's starring role in both the attack ad and in the "Fahrenheit" phenomenon underscores not just its

ability to rattle Republicans and to rally progressives. It demonstrates the power of the new brand of political activism that the Berkeley-born group has unleashed, a power measured both in dollars and in voices. Through its fundraising — a 501c4, a political action committee and a voter fund — MoveOn has raised \$28 million in the last year. And the very weekend the film made its debut, the group's U.S. membership surpassed 2.25 million, with its ranks in California numbering around 400,000, according to MoveOn organizers.

MoveOn brings together grassroots political activism with high-profile media campaigns and celebrity events that enable participants to connect to something larger. "The power of a network increases exponentially with



He knew.

## Congress must censure the president.

every additional node,” said Jonah Seiger, a Washington, D.C., political consultant who specializes in interactive media campaigns. “MoveOn has established itself as the premiere example of this.”

Even its Republican detractors are somewhat daunted by MoveOn’s sheer numbers. “They’re a very well-funded front group for liberal causes,” said former state GOP Assemblyman Howard Kaloogian, founder of MoveAmericaForward, a conservative Web-based group that actively denounced the “Fahrenheit 9/11” film. “They’ve got millions and we’re lucky to get \$50 contributions.”

MoveAmericaForward, launched to rally support for U.S. soldiers in the wake of prisoner beheadings and prison scandals in Iraq, was MoveOn’s Internet and media rival in the public debate over Moore’s film, urging moviegoers to boycott the film and to lobby theatre owners against running it.

Although the film broke box-office records in its opening weekend, Kaloogian said he considered it a victory that Moore later conceded in a national TV interview that his film was not “fair and balanced” journalism but “my opinion of the last four years of the Bush administration... It’s an op-ed piece.”

“MoveOn is not the enemy,” said Kaloogian, “but they’re taking an approach that is wrong. They and Michael Moore are using the troops to pursue a personal political agenda, which is to elect John Kerry.”

### Hitting a nerve

MoveOn was born six years ago on the computer screens of two Berkeley software entrepreneurs, Boyd and his wife Joan Blades. The couple’s initial email, sent to about 100 friends and family members during the 1998 impeachment hearings of President Bill Clinton, was a petition asking Congress to “censure” Clinton and “move

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Graphic from a MoveOn ad that recently appeared in *The Washington Post*

on.” They collected 100,000 signers a week later and half a million within a few months.

It helped that the pair knew how to use the Web — their Internet petition was a technological cut above the online appeals of the day. But software savvy only partly explains the duo’s transformation from founders of the famous “flying toasters” screensavers into accidental activists. The real explanation is that their email hit a nerve, according to Douglas Rushkoff, New York University professor of communications.

“The reason it replicated is not because they’re so brilliant, but because it struck a chord with a whole lot of Americans,” said Rushkoff, author of several books on media activism. “A great viral idea won’t spread unless there’s already a cultural space for it. They named it and it spread. They made politics cool because the Internet is cool.”

They also caught the wave of the Internet, which has gone from zero to 60 percent penetration in American homes and workplaces in the last 10 years, according to Seiger.

The volume of signatures for that first online petition exceed the couple’s wildest expectations. “We had anticipated getting back to working on educational software,” Blades recalled recently. “It was mind-blowing to have the response we got. All the people who had gotten together wanted to continue to stay active and engaged. It felt irresponsible to walk away.”

Like the original petition, many of MoveOn’s positions sound more moderate than the “wild-eyed” image assigned to the group. “Let the Inspections Work” was the rallying cry in the months before the Iraq invasion as the group attracted hundreds of thousands to its anti-war message. But their voice often pushes the envelope beyond the comfort zone of mainstream Democratic organizations. Examples include recent campaigns to fire Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and censure President Bush, along with the Web site’s Bush-bashing “Daily Mislead.”

Though anti-Bush messages have taken center stage, the group’s advocacy also touches issues such as campaign finance reform, the California recall race, and pollution from power plants. Last month, it asked that the Federal Trade Commission stop Fox News from using its “fair and balanced” slogan, charging it’s misleading. MoveOn’s Internet mock primary helped advance the candidacy of Howard Dean and attracted the interest of Gore, who’s

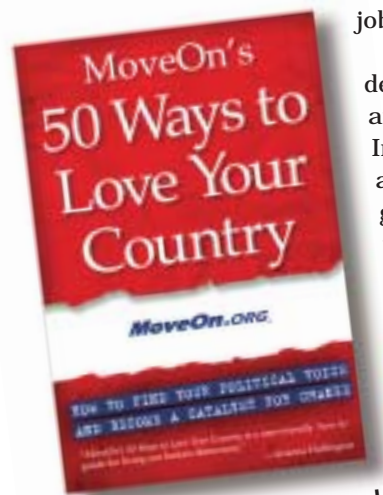
**“Right now they’re in the sweet spot. They’ve got the best of both worlds. They’ve got enough money and enough media savvy to create terrific messaging for mass market media watchers ...”**

**— Douglas Rushkoff, NYU professor**

twice been a keynote speaker at MoveOn events.

Despite its role as a major media presence that spent \$23 million last year on advertising and public relations, Blades stresses that MoveOn’s agenda still arises from discussions with members. The permanent staff of eight work from their homes around the country, reading the thousands of emails they receive each week. On the Web site’s action forum, individuals can promote issues that others rate in importance.

“It’s a very democratic process,” said Blades. “We say, ‘MoveOn members, here’s an opportunity, this ad asking to fire Rumsfeld, do you want to do it?’ What’s exciting about the Internet is an opportunity to have a two-way dialogue. If we’re going to do a good job, we have to listen well.”



MoveOn.org’s 2004 manual

Pioneering that approach to democracy trumps the outcome on any particular issue, said Blades. Indeed, from its initial “censure and move on” petition, few of the group’s causes have actually prevailed.

“The greatest accomplishment is that you can now see all sorts of organizations and candidates having more interactive relationships with supporters,” said Blades. “It’s wonderful that we’re 2.25 million [members], but it’s even more wonderful that Kerry has an online group

of supporters of over a million and that NRDC [National Resources Defense Council] has over 600,000 and Planned Parenthood has over 400,000 and the AFL-CIO has over 1.7 million online activists engaged.”

### **“In the sweet spot”**

That energy has brought new cachet to the old-fashioned grassroots organizing techniques—registering voters, writing letters to the editor, going to rallies and circulating petitions—that comprise the bulk of entries in MoveOn’s best-selling book “50 Ways to Love Your Country.” Like other MoveOn endeavors, the book grew out of an email asking activists to share their personal stories.

“Right now they’re in the sweet spot,” said Rushkoff. “They’ve got the best of both worlds. They’ve got enough money and enough media savvy to create terrific messaging for mass market media watchers and enough facility and reputation on the Internet to organize thousands if not

millions of people and troll for the issues that people want to see addressed. The Internet becomes the metaphor for the kind of democracy they’d like to see.”

The group’s faith in its membership can occasionally come back to bite them, as in the case of the Hitler ad. While saying they will make sure to screen ads next time, Blades shrugs off the misstep as routine de-bugging. “We recognize that we’re a target. The fact is, mistakes are made if you’re innovating. That’s part of the learning process,” she said.

But even the Hitler blunder was part of an online ad contest that Seiger says demonstrated nothing less than “inspired brilliance”—rather than pay an advertising agency millions of dollars to design ads and organize focus groups, MoveOn relied on its members’ creativity and discernment. The winning contender, “Child’s Pay,” depicted kids toiling as dishwashers, janitors, trash haulers, and factory workers, followed by the tagline, “Guess who’s going to pay off President Bush’s \$1 trillion deficit?”

CBS refused to show the spot during the Super Bowl — a move that brought intense media coverage and sent more Internet users to the MoveOn site to check out the ads. MoveOn moved on to CNN — airing the piece 13 times the day of Bush’s State of the Union address and once again on Super Bowl Sunday, in a slot chosen to coincide with halftime.

The “Fahrenheit 9/11” opening was another chance to see MoveOn in action as part of a major media story and a grassroots movement. To realtor Julien Camp, lined up outside Santa Rosa’s Rialto Cinema 45 minutes early for the 7:30 p.m. show, action meant bringing nine friends to the film, fulfilling a pledge he’d made on [www.moveon.org](http://www.moveon.org). The following Monday, he and partner Howard Besserman hosted a house party, one of 4,600 such gatherings around the country.

By Internet and speaker phone, some 55,000 supporters convened in a virtual town hall meeting featuring Moore. The filmmaker reflected on the movie’s box-office successes and thanked MoveOn supporters for helping it succeed. Then participants got down to business: planning bring-your-own-cell-phone parties to register voters in battleground states like Ohio and Oregon and brainstorming ways to raise more money for MoveOn.

For activists like Camp, MoveOn is an awakening. “There’s a momentum that’s started that can’t be stopped.” 🏠

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