

# Gun violence in the US

TV documentary about the US love of firearms makes history

**B**owling for Columbine by the American filmmaker Michael Moore is the first documentary to be entered in competition at Cannes for 46 years. Its moving and occasionally funny analysis of gun violence in the US was greeted warmly by critics yesterday.

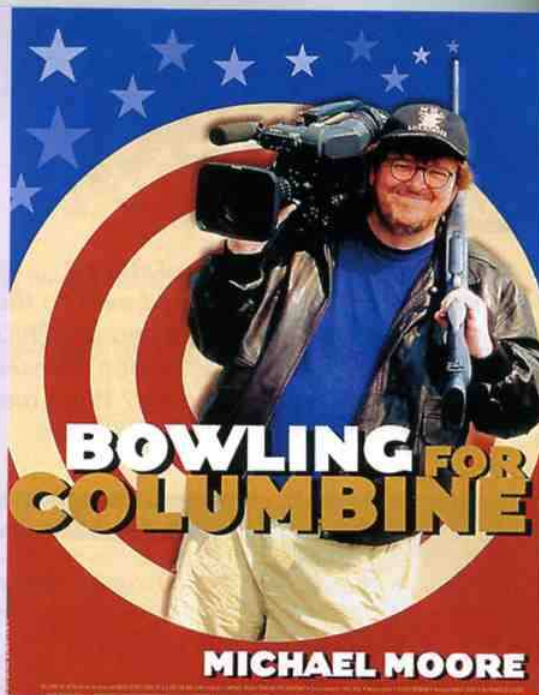
Moore, 48, said that the question he set out to ask was "Are we a nation of gun nuts or just nuts?"

At the start of the picture, he opens a bank account and receives a free gun. He discloses that the bullets used to kill 12 students and a teacher at the Columbine high school in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999 were bought for 17 cents each from a Wal-Mart supermarket and encourages two teenage boys who still have bullets lodged in their spines after the Columbine attack to return bullets to the chain. After meeting them, Wal-Mart announced it would no longer sell such guns and bullets.

A member of an armed militia in his home state, Michigan, tells Moore: "It's an American responsibility to be armed." But the denouement comes when Moore confronts the vice president of the National Rifle Association, Hollywood star Charlton Heston, over his defence of the second amendment to the US constitution that allows Americans to bear arms. He attacks Heston for taking part in NRA rallies backing gun ownership near schools in Columbine and Flint, Michigan, where children had also recently been shot dead.

Why, he asks, do so many Americans kill each other with guns and why do so many of them feel they need to be armed? "We have a history of violence," replies Heston, "perhaps more than most other countries." When Moore retorts that Germany and Britain have violent histories, too, but currently a relatively tiny number of gun-related killings, Heston walks out.

Bowling for Columbine was a personal journey for Moore; he had been a marksmanship champion as a teenager and is a lifelong member of the NRA.



"I think bowling for Columbine is the most provocative thing in terms of film that I've ever made," said Moore yesterday.

It is hard not to agree, especially as the film expands from being an analysis of US gun culture to a revisionist history of the United States, suggesting the country was born in fear of outsiders and that that fear continues to influence US foreign policy.

"The very first sentence you learn about US history as a child is 'The Pilgrims came to America because they were afraid of being persecuted'. Then what happened? They encounter the Indians and are afraid of them, so they kill them; then they start becoming afraid of each other and start seeing witches and burn them; then they win the revolution, but they're afraid the British are going to come back. So someone writes the second amendment that says 'Let's keep our guns because the Brits could come back'.

"The genesis of fear in America came from having a slave population that in just 86 years from the time of the revolutionary war in 1775 to the civil war in 1861 grew from 700,000 to 4 million. In parts of the rural south, blacks outnumbered whites by a three to one margin and there were a lot of slave rebellions. So in 1836 Samuel Colt invented the six-shooter..."

"Ultimately this film isn't about Columbine or even about guns. It's about our culture of fear and how that fear leads us to acts of violence, domestically and internationally."

Stuart Jeffries,  
The Guardian, Friday May 17, 2002