

The US election: the conspiracy begins to unravel

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New information has emerged in the press that sheds further light on the extraordinary events of election night, November 7-8, pointing to a brazen attempt by the Republican campaign of George W. Bush to stampede the television networks and seize the presidency by stealth.

Both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* reported in passing on Monday that the Fox News Channel official who issued the late-night announcement last week that Bush had taken Florida and won the election was a first cousin of George W. Bush and the Republican candidate's brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush.

The man in question is John Ellis, who heads the election decision desk at Fox. According to an article entitled "Bad Call in Florida" by the *Post's* director of polling, Richard Morin, Ellis unilaterally declared his cousin the winner without having received any such call from the Voter News Service (VNS), the network exit poll consortium which was supposed to make the state-by-state projections for the TV news outlets.

Fox's declaration was immediately followed by similar statements from CNN, ABC, NBC and CBS, leading Democratic candidate Al Gore shortly thereafter to make a concession telephone call to his Republican opponent. The apparent plot hatched between Bush and his cousin at Fox came within a whisker of succeeding. Gore was on his way to make a public statement conceding defeat when he received a call from Democratic officials in Florida informing him that Bush's margin in Florida was far less than had been reported, and was sinking rapidly. Gore turned around and telephoned Bush to rescind his concession call.

Morin writes: "VNS never called Florida for Bush. Fox News was the first to declare Florida for the Republicans as vote counts supplied by VNS continued

to show Bush with a substantial lead. Fox announced the call at 2:16 AM. (Ironically, the decision to declare Bush the winner was made by John Ellis, who headed the call desk at Fox and happens to be Bush's cousin)."

By 3 a.m. last Wednesday all of the networks had retracted their projections of a Bush victory in Florida and declared the presidential race too close to call.

Morin's ironical aside makes it clear that Ellis's blood ties to the Republican candidate and the Florida governor are common knowledge within the media establishment. But until now they were never made known to the public.

A front-page article in Monday's *New York Times* makes it clear that Ellis is a Bush partisan with access to the inner circles of the Republican campaign. The article by *Times* political correspondent Richard L. Berke quotes Ellis at length about the pre-election strategy and post-election discussions within the Bush camp, and notes that Ellis was "in frequent contact with Mr. Bush."

Neither the *Post* nor the *Times* raises any alarms over the politically incestuous relationship between the Bush campaign and the network official who played the key role in attempting to swing the election to the Republicans. Their own response to this sinister fact underscores the corrupt relationship between the press and the Republican right wing.

The revelation of Ellis's role throws into sharp relief the astonishing chain of events that unfolded last week between Tuesday evening and early morning Wednesday. It highlights an aspect of US elections normally concealed from the public—the collusion between the media establishment and political forces on the right generally favored by the corporate conglomerates that control the news outlets. As the political operatives in both parties are well aware, the

networks play far more than a passive role in the American electoral process, and their projections on election night can have a critical impact on the momentum and ultimately the outcome of a tight contest.

When the networks, taking their lead from the Voter News Service, declared Gore the winner in Florida at 7:50 p.m. Tuesday evening, the Bush campaign knew its prospects for victory had all but vanished. Bush and his top aides retired from their hotel suite to the governor's mansion and launched a feverish back-channel effort to get the networks to withdraw their call on the Florida race.

As is now clear from the tens of thousands of Gore supporters in Florida whose votes were either discarded or mistakenly cast for right-winger Patrick Buchanan, the initial projection of a Democratic win in Florida was based on exit polls that accurately reflected to sentiments of the electorate.

Bush took the unprecedented step of calling the media into the governor's mansion, where he denounced the network projections on Pennsylvania and Florida and predicted that Florida would ultimately go his way. This impromptu media event was a sharp break with election night tradition, when the candidates are expected to refrain from any public statements until they either declare victory or concede defeat.

Within minutes of Bush's intervention, the networks suddenly reversed themselves, removing Florida from the Gore column and declaring it undecided. The network anchormen offered no explanation for the sudden reversal other than vague references to "bad data."

By the early morning hours of Wednesday it had become clear that the outcome nationally would hinge on the results in Florida. At that point Fox, the network of the ultra-right media mogul Rupert Murdoch, made its extraordinary announcement declaring Bush the winner in Florida and the next US president.

The convergence of three factors—the bizarre flip-flops by the networks, the control of Florida's state machinery by Bush's brother, and the role of Bush's cousin at Fox—is in and of itself sufficient to warrant a full-scale investigation into the machinations of the Bush campaign and the networks. When these facts are placed within the context of recent political events—above all, the Republican conspiracy to remove

a twice-elected president by means of a pseudo-constitutional coup—the outlines emerge of a criminal conspiracy to railroad the election on the basis of inaccurate and rigged ballots.

Every step taken by the Bush campaign since election day buttresses this interpretation of events. From its provocative attempt to stampede public opinion by announcing its presidential transition team, to its efforts to block an accurate count of the Florida vote, the Bush camp has demonstrated that it is determined to preempt the decision of the voters and steal the election.

What was the nature of the discussions between the Bush campaign and CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox that led to the networks' reversal of their early call for Gore in the Florida vote?

What did George W. Bush and his brother Jeb know about voting irregularities and voter intimidation in Florida? Why were they so certain that Florida would end up in their camp?

What discussions occurred between Bush campaign operatives and John Ellis of Fox News Channel?

These are only a few of the questions that should be addressed to the Bush campaign and the networks.

The events of the past week make it clear that should Bush capture the White House, the Republican right will use its control of the machinery of the state to ride roughshod over democratic rights and launch unprecedented attacks on the working class. Workers should ask themselves: if the cabal around Bush is prepared to use criminal methods to gain power, to what methods will it resort to defend its rule against social protest and resistance from below?



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