

Elements of a conspiracy

How Bush's man at Fox News worked to shape the outcome of the US election

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In the early morning hours of November 8, Fox News Channel declared that the pivotal state of Florida had gone for George W. Bush. At 2:16 a.m. Fox announced that the Texas governor had won the state, thus securing the 271 electoral votes needed to win the presidential election. The other television networks followed suit in a matter of minutes. The call was subsequently withdrawn, and to date the Florida outcome remains undecided.

The individual responsible for recommending that Fox call Florida for Bush was John Ellis, who led the network's decision desk. Ellis was not a disinterested party in the presidential election, but the first cousin of the Republican candidate and his brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush.

Details emerging since Election Day concerning Ellis's role in the network's decision to call Florida for Bush raise serious questions as to whether his actions and Fox News's complicity constituted not only a violation of the democratic rights of the electorate, but a criminal conspiracy.

Ellis makes no bones about his Republican leanings and his partisan support for Bush. And according to his own account of his election night activities, contained in an article in the current issue of the *New Yorker* magazine, he was in constant communication with his cousins George W. and Jeb Bush.

Shortly after 6 p.m. two waves of exit polls from the Voter News Service (a consortium set up by the major TV networks and Associated Press) showed the Florida vote going for Democratic candidate Al Gore. John Ellis received a call from the Bush campaign in Austin and told them the bad news. At 7:52 p.m. the major networks, including Fox, called Florida for Gore.

Just after 8 p.m. Jeb Bush phoned Ellis and asked him, "Are you sure?", to which Ellis responded, "We're looking at a screen full of Gore." It was at this point that the Bush campaign—aided by information to which they were privy via their family connection at Fox—went into overdrive to reverse what appeared to be a Democratic victory.

The Bush team called a press conference at the governor's mansion in Austin and told the media that, in their opinion, the vote was too close to call in Pennsylvania and Florida. The convening of such a meeting with the press was highly unusual and broke with previous election night precedent, according to which candidates refrain from talking to the press until one of them concedes and the other makes a victory speech.

The actions of the Bush campaign constituted a bald-faced attempt to co-opt a servile media into stampeding public opinion in its favor. The TV networks broadcast the interview even as large numbers of voters were still heading to the polls.

The Bush protest appeared to achieve the desired effect. According to Ellis's account, Voter News Service reports showed a reversal in Florida between 8:00 and 9:00 p.m. in Bush's favor. Attributing their previous projection for the Democrats to "bad data" in one Florida county, between 9:00 and 9:30 all of the networks retracted their call for Gore and called the race "too close to call."

What happened several hours later was even more suspicious. *Newsweek* reports that in the hours after midnight Bush's margin in Florida began to dwindle. A lead of 200,000 shrank to 100,000 and then to only 60,000. But remarkably, despite this diminishing lead,

at 2:16 a.m. Fox News made the call—on the direction of John Ellis—for Bush. Karl Rowe, Bush's chief strategist, reportedly commented, “It's just Fox,” an apparent reference to Fox's unabashed slant toward the Republicans. But within a matter of minutes all of the networks had jumped on the bandwagon, declaring Bush the winner.

In his interview with the *New Yorker* magazine, Ellis recounted his 2 a.m. conversation with George W and Jeb Bush: “It was just the three of us guys handing the phone back and forth—me with the numbers, one of them a governor, the other the president-elect. Now *that* was cool.” In other words, the Republican candidate, and the governor of the state where the outcome of the race would be determined, had a direct line—through their cousin—to a media outlet that would broadcast their “victory” nationwide.

The extraordinary sequence of events that followed is by now well known. In response to the call by the networks Al Gore telephoned Bush to concede the election. But as Gore was on his way to deliver his concession speech, the vice president's advisors urged him to turn back, telling him Bush's lead had dropped to only several thousand votes. Gore phoned Bush rescinding his concession.

Despite the media manipulation, the jubilation in the Bush camp would be short-lived. By 3 a.m. the networks would again reverse their call, putting Florida back in the undecided category. But the Bush campaign continues to refer to this sordid episode of media manipulation—spearheaded by their man at Fox News—as one of their many “victories” in the presidential race. According to Mark Fabiani, Gore's communications director, “To have a network like Fox call it and everybody follow suit was a tremendously damaging thing. It took literally 24 to 48 hours to convince people that Gore had won the popular vote.”

After Ellis's role was revealed in the press, right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch, chairman of News Corp, which owns Fox News, came to his defense. He said that on election night “every journalist at every channel was trying to get in touch with every candidate, trying to swap information. That's their job.” John Moody, vice president of editorial news at the Fox channel, commented, “I don't believe you should punish people for who they are related to, as long as they don't misuse either the relationship or their ability

to get information.”

The media as a whole has been reluctant to make much of John Ellis's election night activities. Numerous calls by the *World Socialist Web Site* to the television networks elicited “no comment.” Consistent with their role in obscuring the machinations of the Republican right—first in the effort to drive Clinton from office, and now in the effort to obtain Florida's electoral votes and the presidency by means of fraud—they choose to look the other way.

However an examination of the communication between the Bush cousins on election night—particularly when viewed in light of the subsequent drive by the Republicans to ride roughshod over voters' rights and stampede their way to the White House—exposes something much more sinister than a mere swapping of information.

A glaring anomaly has never been explained. Why did Fox call Florida for Bush at a point when the Texas governor's lead was plummeting so rapidly that before Gore could even reach the location of his concession speech, it had all but evaporated? One plausible scenario is the following: Ellis might have called the election for Bush at 2:16 a.m. not because the poll data from the Voter News Service showed him winning but, on the contrary, because it raised the specter of Bush losing the election.

Did Ellis, fearing that the networks might move Florida back into the Gore column, decide to make a preemptive strike in the hope of stampeding the other networks and conning Gore into making a premature concession? Did the Bush campaign have a hand in Ellis's call?

The strange and unexplained coincidence of a disappearing margin for Bush and Fox's unilateral call, combined with the secret communications between Ellis and the Bush camp, provide sufficient grounds for an investigation into the possibility of an illegal conspiracy to steal the election.



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