

Once again on the US "free press"

## Fox News chief doubled as political adviser to Bush

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The revelation that Fox News Channel Chairman Roger Ailes sent a secret memo offering political advice to George W. Bush after last year's terrorist attacks illustrates one of the fundamental facts of American political life: the utterly dishonest and politically incestuous relationship between the mass media and the government.

The Ailes-Bush episode came to light through a passing reference in Bob Woodward's new book, *Bush at War*. The book is an account, based on insider information, of the first 100 days in the Bush White House following the September 11 hijack-bombings. Woodward reports that on October 7, 2001 Karl Rove, Bush's chief political adviser, delivered a "confidential communication" from Ailes to the president.

Woodward continues: "It had to be confidential because Ailes, a flamboyant and irreverent media executive, was currently the head of Fox News, the conservative-leaning television cable network that was enjoying high ratings. In that position, Ailes was not supposed to be giving political advice. His back-channel message: The American public would tolerate waiting and would be patient, but only as long as they were convinced that Bush was using the harshest measures possible. Support would dissipate if the public did not see Bush acting harshly."

Thus the head of one of the nation's major news outlets coached the president on how best to manipulate public opinion. In doing so, Ailes was carrying out through his top-level political connections the job that Fox newscasters and commentators do on a daily basis—peddling lies, half-truths and government handouts as news, in order to misinform and dupe the public.

Ailes issued a statement after the release of *Bush at War* claiming that he had merely written "a personal note to a White House staff member as a concerned American expressing my outrage about the attacks on our country." He refused, however, to make public the contents of the letter. Ailes said that he and Woodward had talked the incident over and that it was a "non-issue."

Ailes' secret memo and his brazen defense of his conduct have provoked barely a murmur of protest from the media at large. The *New York Times* merely suggested that "as a top executive of a news organization he [Ailes] should know better than to offer private counsel to Mr. Bush."

The *Times* and the rest of the establishment media have good reason to play down the significance of Ailes' flagrant partisanship and conflict of interest. The Murdoch-owned Fox News simply exhibits in the most shameless and overt manner the cynical and corrupt relationship between the media and the American state. The main difference between Fox and its rivals is that the Murdoch news outlet is more openly tied to one of the two big business parties, the Republicans, and barely makes a pretence of impartiality.

Ailes's own biography is a case in point. He became media adviser for Richard Nixon in the late 1960s and is widely credited with the latter's political resurrection. He scripted Ronald Reagan's second debate with Walter Mondale in 1984 and created the notorious Willie Horton commercial for the senior George Bush in the 1988 election (which featured a black man convicted of murder who had been paroled by the administration of Bush's Democratic opponent, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, and was

later arrested for rape and assault).

In 1992 Ailes claimed that he had finished with politics and that his contract with the short-lived Rush Limbaugh television program prevented him from political consulting. However, according to *New York Daily News* business columnist Paul Colford, Ailes “privately urged Bush’s reelection campaign to get rough, and he helped the president prepare his acceptance speech at the Republican convention.”

Along the way Ailes has made a fortune with his own media production and consulting firm. He has been chair and chief executive officer of Fox News and the Fox News Channel since it began in January 1996.

The Fox cable channel is a hotbed of right-wing ideologues, including talk-show host and demagogue Bill O’Reilly (who writes for the extreme right *WorldNetDaily.com*), Brit Hume (a contributor to the *American Spectator* and Murdoch-owned *Weekly Standard*), David Asman (formerly of the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page), Tony Snow (a former speechwriter in the first Bush administration), Sean Hannity (a radio talk-show host), Fred Barnes (editor of the *Weekly Standard*) and numerous others.

The connections between Fox and the Bush administration, as the confidential communication between Ailes and George W. Bush indicates, reach the highest levels. On Election Day 2000, John Ellis, a first cousin of Bush, headed Fox’s “decision desk.” After a series of telephone consultations with the Bush headquarters in Texas, Ellis called Florida a win for Bush in the early morning hours of Wednesday, November 8, sparking a stampede of similar calls by the other networks. A Bush victory in Florida gave the Republican candidate the electoral votes necessary to secure the presidency, even though Bush had lost the popular vote. Subsequently, the networks revoked their declaration of a Bush win and labeled Florida “too close to call,” sparking the two-month struggle over the Florida vote that ultimately led to the Supreme Court ruling handing the White House to Bush.

Even though it was later revoked, the Fox projection created the public impression that Bush had won the presidency, helped legitimize his subsequent claims and played a material role in the successful campaign to steal the election and place the Texas governor in the White House.

State manipulation of the news is by no means unique

to Fox. Every television network engages in it. During the US war in Afghanistan last autumn, executives of CNN instructed their reporters to downplay civilian casualties and damage done by US military attacks, on the grounds that such reports might weaken popular support for the invasion. CNN Chairman Walter Isaacson told the *Washington Post* it seemed “perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan.”

“We’re entering a period in which there’s a lot more reporting and video from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan,” Isaacson said. “You want to make sure people understand that when they see civilian suffering there, it’s in the context of a terrorist attack that caused enormous suffering in the United States.”

A watershed for CNN came in its capitulation to the military and right-wing forces over the “Operation Tailwind” affair. In 1998 the cable news channel broadcast a program reporting allegations that the US military had used chemical weapons in Laos in 1970. The program provided substantial evidence that the military had used sarin, a deadly nerve gas, in Operation Tailwind.

When former civilian and military officials, Henry Kissinger and Colin Powell, among others, denounced the program, CNN officials capitulated unconditionally. Ted Turner apologized profusely and the network fired the two producers of the program.

The US media, which has turned sharply to the right along with rest of political elite, has been conditioned over the course of several decades to function as the conduit for Pentagon misinformation and lies. Fox, CNN and the major networks are willing and eager to play that role in an invasion and colonial-style occupation of Iraq.



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