

Bush's hatchet man: two biographies of Karl Rove

Bush's Brain and Boy Genius

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Bush's Brain: How Karl Rove Made George W. Bush Presidential by James Moore and Wayne Slater; *Boy Genius: Karl Rove, the Brains Behind the Remarkable Political Triumph of George W. Bush* by Lou Dubose, Jan Reid and Carl M. Cannon

Karl Rove, chief political advisor to George W. Bush, is the subject of two recently published books by veteran journalists.

Bush's Brain How Karl Rove Made George W. Bush Presidential was authored by television correspondent James Moore and Wayne Slater, Austin, Texas, bureau chief of the *Dallas Morning News*.

Boy Genius: Karl Rove, the Brains Behind the Remarkable Political Triumph of George W. Bush was penned by Lou Dubose, Jan Reid and Carl M. Cannon. Dubose, formerly an editor for the *Texas Observer* and *The Austin Chronicle*, co-authored *Shrub: The Short But Happy Political Life of George W. Bush*. Reid is a novelist and magazine journalist, and Cannon is the White House correspondent for the *National Journal*.

Considering the subservient role the media has played in relation to the Bush administration, it is no surprise that neither volume deals with the real social and political significance of figures like Rove, one of the most dismal representatives of the political underworld.

Bush's Brain and *Boy Genius* provide glimpses into Rove's machinations, but manage to stay within definite boundaries and leave the political status quo essentially unquestioned. They gloss over, for example, critical events relating to the ascension of Bush to the presidency. Neither work seriously treats the 2000 presidential election result as a political hijacking, organized by a right-wing cabal that included Rove.

Although much of the two books' material overlaps, *Boy Genius: Karl Rove, the Brains Behind the Remarkable Political Triumph of George W. Bush*, as the title suggests, adopts a less critical attitude and in general is a less substantive work.

Both volumes are muckraking accounts of Rove's career, but despite their varying levels of criticism, the journalist/authors cannot help but express admiration for him. At various moments, it becomes clear that the authors measure Rove by the standards of contemporary American culture: Rove is a success, a "winner" and not a "loser," no matter how unattractive he is as a personality and political type.

Bush's Brain begins by claiming that Rove is "something grander" than a presidential advisor. "His influence marks a transcendent moment in American politics: the rise of an unelected consultant to a position of unprecedented power," which may "raise" constitutional questions. The book's authors describe Rove as the "co-president of the United States." This is a remarkable assertion, but even more remarkable is the failure of the authors to grasp that the rise of an unelected consultant takes place as the consequence of the rise of an unelected president! Rove's prominence is one expression of the quasi-Bonapartist character of the Bush

administration.

"Cabinet appointments were vetted through him [Rove], judicial nominations crossed his desk, as did the details of a proposed energy bill, administration policy on stem-cell research, steel tariffs, and health care policy. Nearly every speech was shown to Rove before it was delivered," asserts *Boy Genius*.

This wide portfolio is all the more significant because Rove seems to have little interest in the substance of policy, outside of its impact on maintaining political office. He rose through the ranks of the Republican Party as a career political operative, concerned mainly with the process of manipulating public opinion to produce a desired electoral result.

While a hard-core right-winger, Rove is not a product of the Christian fundamentalists, the neo-conservatives, the Southern racists or other factions of the contemporary far right. He comes from a slightly earlier, but equally foul, political tradition—the McCarthyite red-baiter.

Born in Denver in 1950, Rove grew up in Colorado, Utah and Nevada. Beginning his political career as a die-hard Nixonite (from age 9), Rove "escaped the Vietnam draft, but loathed everything those anti-war protesters on TV stood for," according to *Boy Genius*. "I came from a relatively conservative state, Utah, and it was hard to sympathize with all those Commies," proclaimed Rove.

After dropping out of college, Rove's first foray into dirty tricks campaigning was in Illinois in 1970. Gaining entry into the office of Alan Dixon, a Democrat running for state treasurer, Rove stole campaign stationery and printed false invitations to Dixon's campaign headquarters, promising "free beer, free food, girls, and a good time." They were distributed in places such as homeless shelters. In 1973, while chairman of the College Republicans, Rove first hooked up with George Bush the elder, who was then the chairman of the Republican National Committee, beginning his role as a Bush family retainer.

Rove went to Texas in 1977 to work for a Bush Political Action Committee (PAC) run by James Baker. At the time of Rove's arrival, U.S. senator John Tower was the only Republican holding statewide office. When Rove left in 2001 to serve as a senior adviser to President Bush, all 29 statewide elected offices were held by Republicans, and both U.S. Senate seats were occupied by Rove clients, what *Bush's Brain* calls "a shiny roster of winners." Both books present this phenomenon as the product of Rove's ingenious handiwork. It would be more accurate to say that when Rove arrived in Texas, only one statewide Republican politician was unscrupulous enough to hire him—by the time he left, they all were.

Authors Moore and Slater of *Bush's Brain* state that "the Texas political landscape was spotted with the blood of those who had been taken down by Karl Rove." Despite this awestruck attitude, however, Rove's track record is hardly one of unbroken success: he helped run Bush the elder's abortive 1980 presidential campaign as well as Phil Gramm's presidential

campaign debacle in 1996.

What neither *Boy Genius* nor *Bush's Brain* choose to recognize is that Rove was a consequence, not the cause, of a process that saw a wholesale movement throughout the South of conservative white Democratic Party politicians into the Republican Party. A pivotal moment of this shift, part of the movement to the right by the entire political establishment, came in 1983 when Gramm, then a Democrat, quit Congress to run again for his seat as a Republican. He then became one of Rove's major clients.

To help his clients win office, Rove conducted "whisper wars"—a genteel way of saying slander campaigns—against political opponents. Whispers of homosexuality in the Texas state government purportedly undermined the gubernatorial campaign of incumbent Ann Richards in her unsuccessful 1994 fight against Rove's client George W. Bush. The same tactic was used in the 2000 GOP primary against John McCain. Rumors were circulated that McCain, a former Vietnam prisoner of war, had become mentally unhinged as a result of his imprisonment.

Although Bush was Rove's premier asset—"the keys to the kingdom"—the latter maintained a list of private business clients who paid for his political advice. Among them was tobacco giant Philip Morris, which hired Rove to provide "political intelligence." Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos and Angolan anti-communist guerrilla leader and mass murderer Jonas Savimbi also paid Rove to lobby for them.

Philip Morris supported tort reform, the campaign by big business to curb liability from lawsuits involving injury, illness or death. Texas was one of the first states to sue the tobacco companies for recovery of Medicaid costs for treatment of tobacco-related illnesses. At the time, Rove shamelessly claimed: "My job advising Philip Morris has nothing to do with my working for the governor."

By 1997, Bush was in the early stages of emerging as a potential presidential candidate. In Texas, he appointed a committee to conduct statewide hearings, dubbed "the tax road show." According to *Bush's Brain*, Bush's tax plan was copied directly from Ronald Reagan's sweeping tax proposals in the 1980s. His tax committee included Enron CEO Kenneth Lay. "These were Karl Rove's guys, the big-money guys, and the financial foundation of the national GOP.... [O]nce Bush decided to move forward on a plan to cut taxes, the voices shaping it sounded remarkably as if they all belonged to Rove," argue the authors of *Bush's Brain*.

The 2000 presidential election campaign is what supposedly established Rove's standing as a political genius. The two books fail to mention or gloss over the fact that only days before the November balloting Rove predicted a landslide victory for Bush, with the Republican candidate capturing 320 votes in the Electoral College, indicating that the master strategist completely misread the actual shifts in public opinion. In fact, Gore won the popular vote by a margin of more than 540,000, and the Electoral College vote was the closest in more than a century.

Bush's eventual victory was only due to the machinations of the Republican Party on election night and in Florida in the subsequent weeks, a conspiracy in which Rove was centrally involved, culminating in the anti-democratic ruling by the US Supreme Court that shut down vote-counting.

The events of election night are worth recalling briefly. Around 8 p.m., the major television networks, based on information provided by the generally reliable Voter News Service, projected Vice President Al Gore the victor in Florida. Such an outcome spelled likely defeat for Bush. As *Boy Genius* reports, the projection "stunned and horrified" Rove. In an unprecedented move, he "rushed to get himself on the air" (national television) where he admonished the networks for "prematurely" calling Florida. In another unprecedented action, Bush held an unscheduled press conference in which he repeated this message. The purpose of these desperate efforts was not primarily to appeal to last-minute voters, as *Boy Genius* suggests, but to put pressure on the television networks to rescind

their projection, which they all subsequently did.

At around 2 a.m., Fox News, whose decision desk was headed by Bush's first cousin John Ellis, unilaterally declared Florida and thus the national election for the Texas governor, a call then taken up by the rest of the networks. This projection turned out to be false, and the networks were eventually obliged to term the Florida race "too close to call," but the psychological edge provided by their having declared Bush the victor in the presidential election had an undoubted and enduring impact on public opinion.

The authors of *Bush's Brain* produce material that underscores the fact that for the first time in modern history a president attained office through outright criminality. Documents released by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) some 19 months after the election reveal that the Bush team flew an estimated 250 operatives to Florida to disrupt the vote recount. Dubbed the "Brooks Brothers Riots" (after the upscale clothing worn by the disrupters), a successful effort was organized to stop the recount in Miami-Dade county of the estimated 10,000 "undervotes"—ballots for which no presidential choice had been registered by the original machine count.

The well-heeled "rioters" banged and kicked on the doors and windows of the office where the canvassing board was counting the ballots and physically assaulted or threatened a number of Democratic Party representatives on the scene. A fleet of corporate jets, including planes owned by Enron chairman Lay, a key Bush supporter, and Halliburton, the energy services firm where Vice President Dick Cheney had served as CEO, transported the hooligans.

"Karl Rove, working with James A. Baker III, put it all together," state the authors of *Bush's Brain*, adding, "Rove always worked best while hiding behind the curtain."

The authors of both *Bush's Brain* and *Boy Genius* express a certain admiration for what they consider to be Rove's skills in making Bush "presidential"—covering up his obvious intellectual inadequacy and his inability to express himself without a script. *Bush's Brain* describes Bush as "remarkably apolitical." It mentions a meeting at the White House with Bush, media chief Mark McKinnon and Rove. Bush pushes a button and four attendants in white jackets appear. "Yes sir, Mr. President. Is there something we can get you?" Bush dispatches the attendants for a glass of water and says to Rove: "Now that's power!"

Boy Genius ends with a brief reference to the 2002 midterm elections.

"One can say Rove was a superb talent scout and recruiter of candidates," proclaim the authors. "George W. Bush did not come north from Texas to be thought of as a loser. Neither did his personal 'boy genius.' And as soon as the votes were counted in November 2002, the planning began anew for 2004 and the contest that will truly determine the Bush-Rove legacy," write the authors in the epilogue, revealing themselves to be more admirers than critics of Rove's methods.

The authors of *Bush's Brain* also end their work by waxing ecstatic about Bush's standing after the midterm elections and during the build-up for war against Iraq: "The president was confident. The public believed [in the case for war against Iraq]. And the Democrats cowered... Bush was almost mythological, descending from the sky in the world's command center called Air Force One, possessed of a relentless level of approval from the people who were enduring hard times caused, in part, by his leadership. In the closing days [of the midterm elections], it was obvious voters were deciding to give the president what he wanted: congressional support for Republicans and a mandate to clear out Saddam."

The notion that Bush is unchallengeable, a quasi-mythical being, is patently absurd and, more than anything, demonstrates the political outlook of these supposed critics. The temporary success of the Bush-Rove team has less to do with their innate strength than with the historic collapse of liberalism and the prostration of the Democratic Party. The current crisis arising from the exposure of Bush administration lies about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction," whatever its immediate outcome,

demonstrates the fundamentally narrow social base of the present regime and its inherent political weakness.

The authors of *Bush's Brain* contend that “Rove represents a new species of advisor,” a “product of the permanent campaign, the co-president, whose relationship with Bush, and his faithful guidance, have put him at the heart of power in a manner unknown to previous political consultants and U.S. electoral history.” But Rove must be placed within the appropriate political context—the takeover of the Republican Party by semi-fascist elements from the Christian right. He represents the rise of political gangsterism in the Republican Party, and his current political “success” is the product of the alliance of these forces with the Christian fundamentalists, for which he has been a leading facilitator.

In general, the authors elevate Rove’s role at the expense of other members of the Bush administration, such as Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Both books tend to exaggerate his significance in order to avoid a more probing analysis of the present government and the political and social crisis in America.

Nonetheless, the ascent of this right-wing mediocrity, whose only apparent skill is manipulation and deceit, to the highest levels of power is telling. It is one expression of the decay of bourgeois democracy in the US and the degeneration of the ruling elite as a whole. In the final analysis, semi-criminal elements like Rove come out of the woodwork to attempt to rescue, by any means necessary, a fatally diseased American capitalism.



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