

BuzzFlash Interviews



BuzzFlash Interviews Douglas Kellner, Author of "Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election."

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BuzzFlash.com recently interviewed Douglas Kellner, the author of "Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election." Kellner is a professor and the George F. Kneller Philosophy of Education Chair, Social Sciences and Comparative Education, at UCLA.

In a recent Salon.com review of books on the 2000 election, John Dean wrote of "Grand Theft":

"The failure of the mainstream news media, particularly television news, during Election 2000 is a central theme of University of California philosophy professor Douglas Kellner's book, "Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election."

Kellner asserts that the mainstream news media "failed in their task of providing probing investigative journalism, intelligent analysis and critique of partisan positions, and independent analysis of the stakes of the combat in the events such as the struggle for the presidency that followed Election 2000." Employing the tools of critical social and media theory analysis (but explaining his findings in lay terms), he persuasively documents the basis of his conclusions, not only regarding the media's failure, but also supporting his contention that the Republicans stole the presidency.

Before joining the UCLA faculty in 1997, Douglas Kellner was at the University of Texas in Austin. As an experienced Bush watcher, he offers this heads up: "The coming Bushgate will be the inexorable and possibly cascading torrent of revelations that will uncover the slimy political and economic history of the Bush dynasty, the particular scandals that George W. Bush has been involved in, the correlation between the contributors to the Bush campaign and his actual policies, and the hopeful uncovering and dissemination of the manipulations, machinations, and possible criminality involved in his theft of Election 2000."

Given the current headlines about Enron's colossal failure and its close ties to the Bush administration, it is not easy to dismiss Kellner's charge as mere Bush bashing by a left-leaning scholar. To the contrary, I found myself carefully rereading parts of Kellner's book where he addresses the media's failure "to pursue George W. Bush's family history, scandalous business career, dubious record as governor, lack of qualifications for the presidency, and serious character flaws."

BuzzFlash's favorite excerpt from "Grand Theft 2000" is:

"And as for the "reasonable," "honorable," and "bipartisan" politics that Bush promised in his victory speech in Austin and January inauguration speech, the Bush administration has proven itself to be the most dishonorable and ...mendacious in recent history. Already Bush has broken all of his promises in his December 13 Texas Legislature speech where he first defined his presidency. Bush's "political strategist," Karl Rove, joins Nixon's campaign manager, Murray Chotiner, as the sleaziest political operative in history, the master of the slime and slander -- a technique that Rove honed in Texas politics, applied to John McCain in the Republican primaries and then to Al Gore during Election 2000, and aimed at the Clinton's as they left office.

"Lying is not just an accidental side-policy of Bushian politics, a normal business-as-usual where white lies and bending the truth are part of political normalcy (Wink! Wink!), where everyone does it and no one could expect norms of truth to govern all the time. No, Bushspeak lying is Big-Time Mendacity, the Big Lie as the politics of everyday spinning, lying as the very substance of Bushspeak."

BuzzFlash.com is offering "Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election" as one of our premiums at <http://www.buzzflash.com/premiums/#grandtheft>.

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BUZZFLASH: In your book "Grand Theft 2000," your subtitle is "Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election." What are the central points in your book about the role of the media in framing the lens in which the 2000 election was covered?

DOUGLAS KELLNER: The first and key point has to do with the pro-Bush and anti-Gore framing of the mainstream media. This has two different dimensions to it. First of all, there is the issue of positive vs. negative coding. Three different social science research projects -- The Project for Excellence in Journalism, the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and a German group, Media Tenor -- did quantitative coding, inquiring whether Bush or Gore were presented positively or negatively or neutrally in different stories. And it was overwhelmingly Bush who got the most positive codings, while Gore got more negative codings.

Secondly, and probably more crucial than quantitative analysis, is the qualitative frames through which the media presented the election. Bush, for instance, was presented as a different kind of Republican, a compassionate conservative, a uniter, and not a divider, who brought Democrats and Republicans together in Texas to get things done. Now this is manifestly false if you studied the record and the actual politics and the personality of George W. Bush.

As we saw from the pre-September 11 Bush presidency, Bush was hard right and not a compassionate conservative. As I point out in my book "Grand Theft 2000," he was not a compassionate conservative, but cut back programs that would help women, children and the poor while he basically has been giving favors to oil corporations, like Enron, and his major corporate contributors. But the media largely followed Bush's own positive framing as a compassionate conservative during the campaign in its coverage of his candidacy.

Whereas Gore, by contrast, was presented negatively as a liar, serial exaggerator, and as someone connected with the alleged scandals of the Clinton Administration. Yet if you look at the record of Bush in, for instance, the debates, he was actually lying more than Gore.

Gore misspoke a couple of times on petty points in the debates and the media were all over him, claiming that Gore was untrustworthy, he was always making things up, while

implying that he had serious character flaws. Whereas a more rigorous biographical scrutiny of the two candidates would show that Bush had serious character flaws and personal failings that the media tended to ignore.

So the basic frames of how the media presented the candidates favored Bush over Gore. Obviously, with a more critical and analytical and balanced appraisal of the two candidates, you would have very different framings of their respective life histories, records as politicians, and positions if they were equally scrutinized and appraised.

BUZZFLASH: Let me ask you this. Do you attribute this to a predisposition of a "corporate media" toward a candidate who would be more in the interest of the corporations that own the media or was the Bush PR machine more effective in corraling the media in a certain direction -- or the Gore campaign being less successful in defining the election to their advantage? Or a combination thereof?

DOUGLAS KELLNER: A combination thereof, with a couple of other points to make. There's no question that the corporate ownership of the media skews the mainstream media, particularly television, towards the Republicans, and that the corporate media, especially the Fox network and the NBC networks are conservative by ownership and ideology. They favor conservative agendas, they like deregulation, tax cuts, and Republican politics.

Clearly, during the Clinton years, the mainstream media were sharply critical of Clinton and did serious investigative reporting and slamming the President like no president had ever been attacked and insulted by the mainstream media. So clearly there are corporate agendas in the media that make them pre-disposed towards the Republicans and more critical of the Democrats.

But I think your point is well taken that to some extent the Bush people were just more effective in selling their candidate and Bush was maybe more sellable than Gore in the sense of being able to come off as pleasant and a nice guy who was likable. Whereas Gore was more intellectual, policy oriented, and just didn't have the easygoing personality that lends itself to positive media presentation. And Bush and his group seemed more effective in schmoozing reporters and selling himself to the media. Bush is clearly one of the most effective manipulators and schmoozers of reporters that we've seen in American politics, probably even more effective than Reagan in charming and manipulating the press.

BUZZFLASH: How do you explain the contradiction that while the right wing attacks the *New York Times* as "liberal," it was, in reality, one of the leaders in propagating the false Karl Rove spin that Gore was a liar. To the supposed "liberal press," Gore was growing a Pinocchio nose during the election and Bush was portrayed as a beholder of the truth. In reality, as you said, the evidence was just to the contrary. It wasn't just the so-called conservative corporately owned television stations that propagated the Bush spin. It was the *New York Times* and, to a certain degree, the *Washington Post* that led this on the print side.

DOUGLAS KELLNER: Well, this is one of the most distressing aspects of the media coverage of campaign 2000. Whereas it's not surprising that Bush would have the edge with Fox, with NBC/GE and with corporate television that tends to present image and appearance as opposed to analysis and reporting and critique, you might expect better of the newspapers. And it is a major scandal I think that The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* and other leading newspapers failed to really go after Bush and investigate his history, his record, and his positions.

Part of the problem was that there was a younger core of presidential political reporters who tended to like Bush who were writing for the *New York Times* and the *Post*. But the

newspapers as a whole just didn't do much investigative reporting. In fact, probably the most scandalous aspect of the media 2000 coverage of Gore and Bush was the failure to probe into the Bush family personal and political history. Whereas every single little aspect of Gore's background, every embarrassing gaffe, every problematic thing he did was researched and publicized, the Bush family and political and personal history was pretty much overlooked.

I mention in my book "Grand Theft 2000" that when researching the Florida recount wars, there was a newspaper report of a talk that had been given by John Loftus, who was a former Justice Department investigator and investigative journalist, who had just lectured about Prescott Bush, George Herbert Walker Bush's father. Prescott Bush was a banker for National Socialism who helped manage Union National Bank, which helped finance the Third Reich in the 1930s and 40s. Moreover, Herbert Walker, who George W. Bush was named after, was also involved in a lot of corporations that were financing and overlapping with National Socialism, but the Bush family history has never been explored by the mainstream media or major historians, which I find an incredible scandal.

BUZZFLASH: Funding the Nazis.

DOUGLAS KELLNER: The Nazis! So Bush family background was never really covered by the mainstream media. All of the scandals that George H.W. Bush had been involved in, S&L scandals, Iran-Contra, CIA scandals, none of this colorful family history was part of the media discourse during Election 2000. Whereas it's clear now that we see Bush as a President, he's a Bush family man, involved in a lot of family business connections like Enron and military adventures. Obviously Bush's father has played a big role in his life and Bush's brother, Jeb Bush, helped steal the election for him in Florida, so I think Bush family history is very, very significant and important, and it was almost completely overlooked, and continues to be.

By the way, just as a brief sidetrack, the current Enron scandal I think is very closely related to the S&L scandal, with Bushes being involved in both of them. It was Bush I and Reagan who deregulated the banking and savings and loan industry in the eighties, and it was Texas friends of the Bush-Baker family that bought many of these savings and loans in Texas, including my own Lamar Savings, when I was teaching in Austin. And they basically looted and bankrupted them. The S&L crisis cost us over \$500 billion dollars (with some recent estimates as high as \$1.3 trillion!). Obviously, Neil Bush was one of the perpetrators of S&L fraud who was found guilty for his involvement in the Silverado S&L. Jeb Bush was allegedly implicated in a couple sleazy deals involving robbing HUD in housing scams and the national health system in some Medicare scams that he was allegedly associated with. And the media just didn't go into this. And they're still not getting into it despite the Enron scandal.

So given the investigative reporting done in the Clinton era, and the way that Gore was investigated, this is stunning that the Bush family seems to be immune from scrutiny, as was George W. Bush's personal past, and his political history.

And what a past George W. Bush has to explore! When he was governor of Texas, obviously he was in the pocket of Enron and Texas corporations. His administration did tax breaks and giveaways to these corporations, just like he's doing as President. Bush wrecked the environment of Texas with the deregulation of environmental laws so Enron and the energy corporations could do anything they wanted. And it is giving free play once again to Enron and the energy corporations to the detriment of the environment and sound energy policy.

BUZZFLASH: If we recall, the state of Texas went into economic life-support after Bush left. As he is doing now, he promised a free ride, lower taxes and a booming economy. As soon as he left, the state went bust. It kind of reminds BuzzFlash of the scam run by

the "Music Man."

DOUGLAS KELLNER: In regard to Bush and Texas, Ann Richards was a great governor, who compiled a large surplus, just like Clinton did. Ann Richards put the state of Texas in fiscal order for the first time in generations. It was a well-run state, it was pulling a profit, it had very low taxes, no state income tax. Bush came along and cut back corporate taxes for the state of Texas and had tax giveaways and rebates for the wealthy, just like his U.S. tax federal giveaway. In fact, what Bush has done as president is totally predictable from what he did as governor of Texas. And the media didn't make this correlation.

BUZZFLASH: And nor does it seem to make the correlation now. To say what Bush did for Texas he's doing for America. I mean he, at times, says I'm gonna do for America what I did for Texas. And no one says, hey, you bankrupted the state, hey, you allowed Houston and other cities to become among the worst in environmental pollution in the country. Hey, you cut aid to the poor and Medicaid to the bone

Yet the press seems to have absolutely no will to bring any of this reality up and sort of call him on his bluff, so to speak, when he says I'll do for America what I did for Texas. It just seems astonishing. He's already doing for America what he did for Texas in terms of the economy -- and we're paying the price.

Is this in part, due to bias in the press toward George Bush, or is it a combination of bias in the press toward George Bush plus just our growing lack of historical context when it comes to political and public policy discussion in America?

DOUGLAS KELLNER: Well, I think it's all of these but I see some encouraging signs in the investigation of the Enron scandal. The Enron scandal is obviously the biggest financial disaster and scandal in U.S. history. Hundreds of thousands of people are affected by this, not just the workers who lost their pension. But people who lost stock, who had invested in mutual funds or had retirement and pension funds in Enron also got hurt. For instance, my University of California state retirement program lost hundreds of millions of dollars in Enron stock as did the Texas Retirement Pension Plan and other state government pension plans in Florida and many other states.

So, a lot of people have been really burned by this Enron scandal and are very upset about it. And so there's been a lot of investigative reporting that shows that if the media want to do good reporting, they can do it. The *New York Times*, by the way, who we criticized earlier, has been in the forefront of good investigative reporting of Enron. So hopefully there are smart people that are beginning to see that Bushonomics is Enronomics and that the Enron scandal is both an economic scandal and a political one that involves the Bush administration at its very core.

Basically Bush's politics involve giving favors to his biggest corporate contributors who themselves, like Enron, are scandalously corrupt in some cases. Bush's tax cuts and rebates are payoffs to his supporters that could ruin the national budget and his policies are cumulatively on the way to ruining the national and global economy. Hopefully, people who don't want the economy ruined are now going to think twice about Bush and look into Cheney, Bush, and their economic policies.

We haven't mentioned Cheney yet. This is another scandal of election 2000, that there was no real investigation of Cheney's background. The fact that he was hard right in political ideology; completely connected with the oil and energy corporations; paid \$33 million in his severance with the Halliburton corporation and then turned around and put a lot of operatives sympathetic to oil and energy in key Bush administration posts; concocting an energy policy to serve the interests of Enron, Halliburton and other major energy corporations; meeting with members of these corporations to help create his

policy; and now refusing to hand over notes of his meetings as allegations swirl that Enron was able to write in a number of its issues into US energy policy.

And these Cheney scandals just haven't been adequately covered by the corporate media, until recently. Now, as a response to the Enron scandal, there's been quite a bit of investigative reporting about Cheney and his Enron and Halliburton and other corporate connections.

BUZZFLASH: One question a little bit off the media topic, but it seems to BuzzFlash that most businesses and corporations in the United States go about their work in a law-abiding, honorable fashion, particularly small businesses. Now it seems to us that the Bush family, as you mentioned, seem to be often associated with a particularly sleazy side of the business world that pushes at the edge of the ethical envelope and then through it. Do you have any comment on that?

DOUGLAS KELLNER: I totally agree. The Bush family is unusually corrupt and scandalous, as I learned when I was a Professor at the University of Texas. I was in Texas for over twenty-five years, and for eighteen years I had a public access TV show, *Alternative Views*. So I interviewed everyone in town. People like Ralph Yarborough, who'd beat Papa Bush in the 1958 Texas Senate race and seriously hated him. John Henry Faulk, the folk humorist who wrote *Fear on Trial* and broke the blacklist, was a sharp Bush critic; John Stockwell who was the head of the CIA Angola operation, and who worked under Bush when he was CIA director discussed Bush's role in Iran-Contra, in arming Islamic radicals in Afghanistan when they were fighting the Soviets, and his close connections with Noreiga and Saddam Hussein, before he turned on them. These people had story after story about the Bush family and how corrupt and dangerous they were.

Ross Perot, as you might remember, ran against Bush I as president in 1992 in part because he was upset about the corrupt business practices of the three Bush boys. *Mother Jones* had a great cover story about that time called "My Three Sons" that documented Neil Bush's S&L scandals, all of the corrupt real estate and housing and different business deals that Jeb Bush was involved with in Florida, allegedly involved with real Mafioso type of crooks. And George W. Bush basically made his fortune through Harken Oil and many of his biographers claim that he engaged in insider trading, just like the Enron crooks. This insider trading story circulated during the 1994 Ann Richards' campaign and was widely discussed in Texas. So far the national media have not bothered to look into allegations that George W. Bush had himself assimilated his initial nest egg through insider trading.

According to the few critical studies of George W. Bush's remarkable career in business and politics, after years of frat boy ribaldry at Yale, Bush got his father to pull strings so he would not have to go to Vietnam and then got into the Texas National Guard Air Reserves. During his lost years in the 1970s, W. reportedly went AWOL for a year from military duty, was an admitted heavy alcoholic and alleged drug abuser, and a ne'er-do-well failure who finally decided to put together an oil company when he was already well into his 30's. Investors reportedly included the bin Laden family.

Young Bush's initial company Arbusto went bust and was eventually taken over by Harken Energy Corporation, with family friends again jumping in to bail Junior out. Harken soon after received a lucrative Bahrain oil contract, in part as a result of Bush family connections, and the Harken stock went up. But as a member of the Board of Directors, Junior knew that declining profit figures for the previous quarter, about to be released, would depress the value of the stock, so George W. unloaded his stock, in what some see as an illegal insider trading dump. Moreover, young Bush failed to register his questionable sale with the SEC, although later a paper was produced indicating that he had eventually registered the sale, some eight months after he dumped his stock. (It helped that his father was President when Junior should have been investigated for his

questionable business dealings).

[For an update on the story by investigative reporter Knut Royce, released on the Center for Public Integrity web site, see "Bush's Insider Connections Preceded Huge Profit on Stock Deal," www.public-i.org/story_01_040400.htm.]

This story is curiously like the Enron story, where top executives saw that their stock was tanking and sold their stock -- because they knew that the next profit report was going to be a loss, that the scandal was coming. So they dumped their stock. That's insider trading. Thus the allegations that Harken energy was going to have a fairly significant loss on their ledger, and that Bush sold all his stock before this report was released and before the stock fell in half in price is an explosive allegation. Thus Bush could be in very serious trouble if Enron people are accused of insider trading and the charge is brought back to him.

BUZZFLASH: You have a chapter within "Grand Theft 2000" entitled "The Media and the Crisis of Democracy." Can you explain a little about what's in that chapter and the role you feel the American media plays in the crisis of democracy?

DOUGLAS KELLNER: Okay, let me first answer this question in terms of the role of the media in democracy and the positive and negative aspects of the media in our current situation that I describe as a crisis of democracy.

Democracy involves separation of powers in which the media criticize government and other corruption, wrongdoing, or policies that do not serve the public. The public needs to be informed so that they can participate in democracy and I would argue that the media are not adequately informing the public (concerning Bush, for example) and are not adequately criticizing the government (though they did the latter during the Clinton era!).

For democracy to work, for the public to intelligently participate, the public has to be informed. So one role of the media is to give the public information where they can make intelligent judgments, where they can be active and informed citizens. The negative factor, then, in our current situation, is that the mainstream media don't do this. The big television networks are mainly entertainment emporia. They have 20-minute network news that's mostly story, narrative, tabloid entertainment: fluff stories biased towards someone like Bush.

The positive factor, however, is that the U.S. currently has the most vast and varied information sources in history that would make it possible for citizens to get information and be informed. We have some pretty good newspapers. And we have web sites, Internet sites, like BuzzFlash, *Bushwatch.com*, and several others, that bring together the best of American journalism. So that, for instance, by going to BuzzFlash every day, as I and a lot of my students and friends do, they can get the best of American and world journalism and become informed, and thus be good citizens.

So the Internet makes possible democracy in that, one, it informs citizens, it gives us the information we need; and secondly, it gives citizens the forum to engage in the debate and dialogue that is democracy. Your site is also to be commended for publishing letters from your contributors and even circulating on your listserv things that people have written especially for your audience. They want to get something off their chest. And that's democracy.

But these voices do not find themselves obviously in the corporate media. So that's the crisis of democracy; that our mainstream media are neither informing us, giving us the information we need, nor allowing people with critical voices to participate.

BUZZFLASH: One more final question, I can't resist: The role of television. Obviously, for

about 50 years now, America has become increasingly influenced by the role of television. Now cable has even made it stronger in terms of more options, with more people watching television and relying on television to shape their perspective on the news.

Is it possible in the age of omnipresent television for the American Public to make informed decisions, to receive information based on details rather than broad strokes? Beginning with the Reagan administration, we've seen more emphasis on, and this is true of Clinton also, government by the broad theme and brushing aside the details. The Bush administration is clearly stating its future on a permanent war that will keep Americans scared and supportive of the current White House. And the chief vehicle for doing that seems to be television -- images on television, statements, and broad themes. What do you think about the influence of television?

DOUGLAS KELLNER: I'm personally waiting for the day that the Internet replaces television and when more people get their news, their information from Internet sources that are reliable, that are critical, that are providing diverse and wide-ranging views so that people don't have to depend on television. TV is getting more and more conservative, ideological, and propagandistic, particularly since September 11.

All of the TV cable news channels are now from hardright wing to conservative. The cable news channels Fox, NBC, CNN have become more and more conservative, so that mainstream corporate cable news television is an absolute disaster. Most of the pundits and commentators are right wing and completely propagandistic for the Bush administration. You don't get many critical voices or much alternative information.

There are, to be sure, some good public television and public access TV news and information programs, as well as good community and national public radio. But on the whole you have to go to the Internet to become informed. And I'm just hoping the day will come where there's going to be a lot of alternative news sources available on the Internet, so you can see intelligent people discussing the issues that are confronting us, rather than these pundits that are mostly right wing and conservative.

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For more of Kellner's writings, go to his home page at
<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>

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