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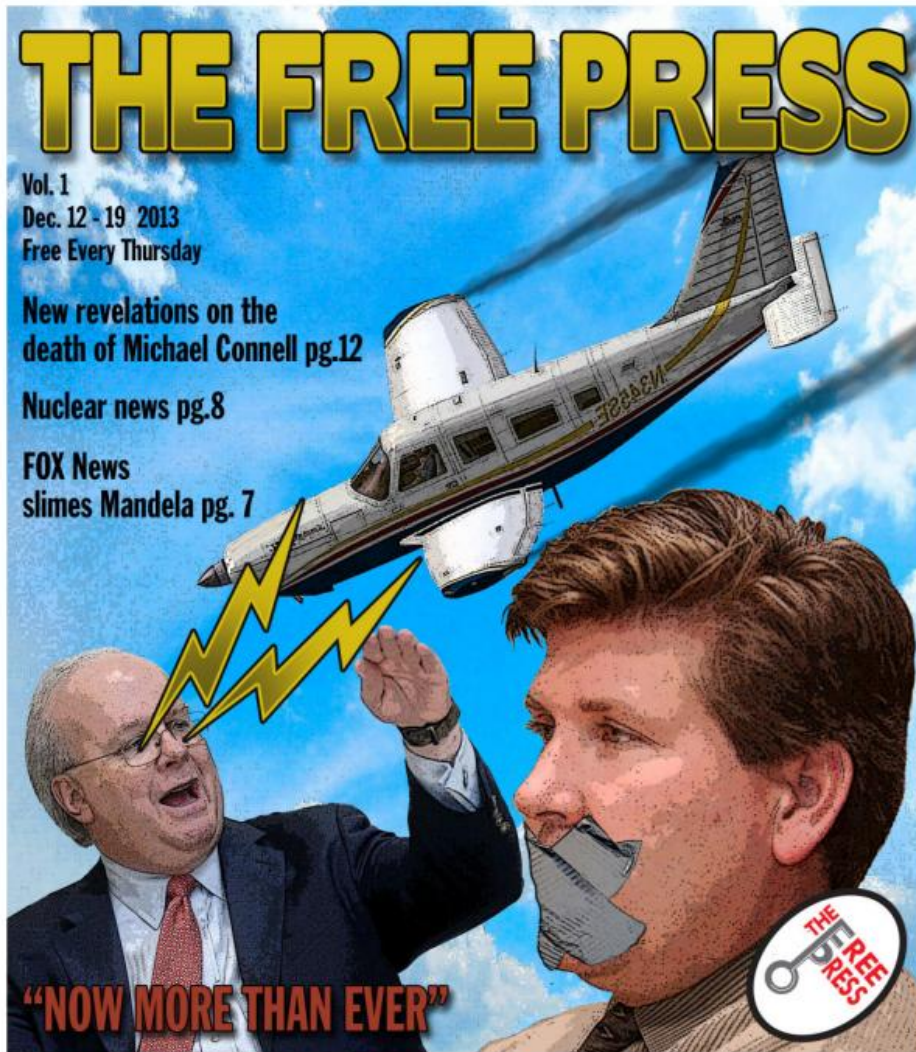
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The ghost of rigged elections past: New revelations on the death of Michael Connell



by Bob Fitrakis

DECEMBER 11, 2013



Michael Connell, the Bush family and Karl Rove's IT guru, was heading home from Washington D.C. to attend his company's Christmas party on Friday, December 19, 2008. An accomplished pilot, he was flying from the College Park, Maryland airport to the Akron-Canton airport in Ohio under unremarkable weather conditions. Yet his Piper Saratoga plane suddenly dove to the ground between two houses in an upscale neighborhood, when he was just 2.5 miles from the airport. The site was roped off, cleaned up within two hours at night against protocol, and the next day his wife found his omniscient Blackberry missing from his still intact knapsack.

The Free Press has uncovered crucial documents that shed light on Connell's mysterious death as the fifth anniversary of his tragic accident approaches. The document reveals that then-Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell had signed a legal Statement of Work (SOW) contract with Connell for IT work on the infamous Election Night 2004, when Kerry unexpectedly lost when exit polls showed him winning

Connell and Blackwell agreed fourteen months prior to the 2004 election that Connell would have "remote monitoring capabilities" to the computer counting Ohio's presidential vote. That means Blackwell planned more than a year in advance for Connell's private partisan external third party company and a subcontractor to have unfettered secret access to Ohio's 2004 vote tally.

The newly discovered contract contains an "Exhibit B" which called for a "mirror" website to

handle Ohio's 2004 actual vote count on Election Night provided by Connell's company, GovTech. The document stated: "GovTech shall install and host (as set forth in Exhibit B) a mirror site of the Application to provide a fail-over solution in the event of failure of the primary installation on Election Day."

This "hot rollover configuration," as the document explained, "can completely re-point the site if the primary site should fail by using some remote monitoring capabilities." And that's exactly what happened at 11:13pm when Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry was up three points over Republican incumbent George W. Bush. Ohio's 2004 votes were outsourced to Smartech in Chattanooga, Tennessee, owned by right-wing evangelical publisher Jeff Averbeck, subcontracted by Connell.

The vote count inexplicably flipped at 12:21am changing from Kerry winning by over 3 percentage points to Bush winning by over 3 percentage points. Overall, there was an unexplainable rapid 6.7 percent shift in the vote count. Smartech was also, curiously, the company that handled Karl Rove's private email accounts from the White House. Millions of Rove's email files have since mysteriously disappeared – including those related to the Valerie Plame scandal and the firing of seven United States attorneys – despite repeated congressional and court-sanctioned attempts to review them. The timing of Connell's accident was very suspicious.

The prior month, on the day before the 2008 November election, Ohio attorneys Cliff Arnebeck and this author (Fitrakis) took Connell's under oath deposition. The purpose was to inquire about his actions during the 2004 vote count and his continued involvement in IT operations for the GOP, including his access to Rove's email files and the circumstances behind their disappearance. In his 2008 deposition Connell was generally evasive, but did disclose key pieces of information that may have proved damaging to Karl Rove and the GOP. Why the vote count was transferred from Ohio to Smartech in Chattanooga, Tennessee remains a mystery.

This would have only happened if there was a complete failure of the Ohio computer election system on Election Night. However, Connell swore under oath that, "To the best of my knowledge, it was not a fail-over case scenario – or it was not a fail-over situation." Bob Magnan, an IT election specialist for the Secretary of State during the 2004 election, agreed that there was no fail-over scenario. Magnan said he was unexpectedly sent home at 9 p.m. on Election Night 2004 and that private contractors ran the system for Blackwell.

Who was Michael Connell? A long-time, outspokenly loyal associate of the Bush family, Connell created the Bush-Cheney website for their 2000 presidential campaign and may have played a role in various computer malfunctions that helped the GOP claim the presidency in 2000. As a chief IT consultant and operative for Karl Rove, Connell was a devout Catholic and the father of four children. In various statements Connell cited his belief that abortion is murder as a primary motivating factor in his work for the Republican Party.

In 2001, Michael Connell's GovTech Solutions, LLC was selected to reorganize the Capitol Hill IT network, the only private-sector company to gain permission from HIR (House Information Resources) to place its server behind the firewall, he bragged. Blackwell hired Connell's company GovTech on July 1, 2003 for seemingly nonpartisan election administration work. But, at the same time, Connell's other company, New Media Communications, was working closely with SmartTech, a company owned and operated by former evangelical Christian publisher Jeff Averbeck. GovTech and Smartech together built Republican and right-wing websites that were hosted on SmartTech servers.

Among their clients were the Republican National Committee, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and gwb43.com – yes, that's George W. Bush, 43rd President.com. In fact, the other two subcontractors working with Connell on Election Night, Averbeck and the Rapp family which owned the company Triad were all ardent right-to-life activists. The King Pin strikes Connell's

death came at a moment when election protection attorneys and others appeared to be closing in on critical irregularities and illegalities. On the night of the 2004 election, exit polls and initial vote counts showed John Kerry the clear winner of Ohio's presidential campaign. The Buckeye State's 20 electoral votes would have given Kerry the presidency.

Connell was deposed as part of the King Lincoln Bronzeville v. Blackwell case that alleged civil rights violations during the 2004 election. During the case, the Ohio Secretary of State's office was forced to produce the election computer system configuration chart that was used in Ohio's 2004 presidential election when there was a sudden and unexpected shift in votes for George W. Bush. This "architectural map" clearly shows the election night server layout system from the Ohio Secretary of State's office to servers owned by Smartech at the Old Pioneer Bank in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Expert witness Stephen Spoonamore, renowned bank and computer fraud expert and GOP member, concluded from the architectural maps of the Ohio 2004 election reporting system that: "Smartech was a man in the middle. In my opinion they were not designed as a mirror, they were designed specifically to be a man in the middle." A "man in the middle" is a deliberate computer hacking setup, which allows a third party to sit in between computer transmissions and illegally alter the data.

A mirror site, by contrast, is designed as a backup site in case the main computer configuration fails. In a sworn affidavit to the court, Spoonamore declared: "The Smartech system was set up precisely as a King Pin computer used in criminal acts against banking or credit card processes and had the needed level of access to both county tabulators and Secretary of State computers to allow whoever was running Smartech computers to decide the output of the county tabulators under its control." "The King Pin I thought was probably sitting somewhere in the middle on the high speed line.

The King Pin is a computer with a person sitting at it that doesn't just steal the information and then use it later like we saw, it's a person who has on board their King Pin computer the code and instructions for the Secretary of State's office and the code and the instructions for a county tabulator. Instead of this happening, this happens...So at 9:00 in the evening Kerry's leading in Ohio and the King Pin is watching these results go through and this operator is sitting here in a company called Smartech," Spoonamore told "Free For All" documentary filmmaker John Ennis. "And remember when I speculated this, everyone said that's ridiculous, that's completely impossible.

Well, we now found that not only was I right, and we know where it was sent. We didn't just have it introduced, it was designed in the Secretary of State's office that they could switch the control from their computer talking to the counties to having Smartech do it. When we found out who owned it and then we found out it was also doing Karl Rove's email," Spoonamore said. Former Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner, Blackwell's successor, confirmed: "This office had a backup system, election night reporting system, with Smartech."

On December 14, 2007, she released her evaluation and validation of election-related equipment, standards and testing, the Everest study, which found that touchscreen voting machines were vulnerable to hacking with relative ease. Arnebeck asked Spoonamore whether or not Smartech had the capability to "input data" and thus alter the results of Ohio's 2004 election. Spoonamore responded: "Yes. They would have had data input capacities. The system might have been set up to log which source generated the data but probably did not."

Spoonamore explained that "they (SmarTech) have full access and could change things when and if they want." Arnebeck specifically asked "Could this be done using whatever bypass techniques Connell developed for the web hosting function?" Spoonamore replied "Yes." Spoonamore also swore that "...the architecture further confirms how this election was stolen. The computer system and SmarTech had the correct placement, connectivity and computer

experts necessary to change the election in any manner desired by the controllers of the SmarTech computers.” “I do not believe George Bush won, I believe Kerry won and I’m a member of the GOP,” admitted Spoonamore.

Was it really an accident? Connell’s sister contacted the Free Press to voice doubts that the crash was an accident. She later told a Wisconsin newspaper, The Daily Page: “At first, it was really hard for me to believe Mike was dead because somebody wanted him dead. But as time goes on, it’s hard for me not to believe there was something deliberate about it.” Connell reportedly had canceled two flights because of suspicions that something was wrong with his plane.

Various threats had been reported involving Connell and other IT experts close to the GOP. On July 24, 2008, Arnebeck emailed Attorney General Michael Mukasey, stating: “We have been confidentially informed by a source we believe to be credible that Karl Rove has threatened Michael Connell, a principal witness we have identified in our King-Lincoln case in federal court in Columbus, Ohio,...” Spoonamore stated that in an October 2006 meeting with Connell, Connell asked questions about how to “permanently destroy hard drives.”

Spoonamore told Connell, “If this is what I think you’re talking about, this meeting is over.” Spoonamore urged Connell to testify before Congress and come clean on the 2004 election. Contacts were made first with U.S. Congressman John Conyers’ office and later directly with Representative Dennis Kucinich. Conyers’ office initially agreed to allow Connell and other skeptics of the 2004 election results to testify, but suddenly withdrew the offer.

Kucinich agreed in principle to set up a hearing, but meanwhile the 2008 election was fast approaching and Connell had decided to lawyer up. Following the 2008 election, Connell wrote in his New Media Communications newsletter: “In our 230 year history, our democracy has suffered worse fates. It’s just that none come to mind right now...This is just a moment in time and this too shall pass. Enduring is the fact that 2000 years ago, a babe was born in Bethlehem. When our Lord God sent his only Son for our salvation,...In spite of the current economic and political conditions, salvation is eternal.”

He would be dead the next month. After Connell’s death, a redacted government document arrived by mail at the Free Press office addressed to Arnebeck stating that Connell’s death was authorized since he was a “NST” – National Security Threat. Project Censored named the outsourcing of Ohio’s 2004 election votes to Smartech in Chattanooga, Tennessee to a company owned by Republican partisans as one of the most censored stories in the world. On this, the fifth anniversary of his death, the mainstream press continues the cover-up but the Free Press will continue the investigation into the Connell’s convenient and mysterious accident and how easy it is to steal U.S. elections.

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