

MEDIA SPECTACLE AND THE CRISIS OF THE U.S. ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN ELECTION 2000

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When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior. The spectacle has a tendency to make one see the world *by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly)*.

Guy Debord

The 2000 U.S. presidential election was one of the most bizarre and fateful in American history. Described in books as a “deadlock,” “thriller,” “the perfect tie,” and even “Grand Theft 2000,” studies of the election have dissected its anomalies and scandals and have attempted to describe and explain what actually happened.¹ In this study, I will analyze how the turn toward media politics and spectacle in U.S. political campaigns and the curious and arguably archaic system of proportional voting in the U.S. tilted the campaign toward George W. Bush and were prejudicial to the election of Al Gore. Gore received over 540,000 votes more than Bush, but because of the U.S. system of proportional voting won less electoral votes and lost the crucial state of Florida. In this chapter, I will argue that media representation of the two candidates and the anomalies of the U.S. system of proportional representation in an arguably archaic Election College were major factors in the highly controversial ascent to the presidency of George W. Bush. Of course, the U.S. Supreme Court decision directly decided the election results and the story of Election 2000 is highly complex and contested. Yet focus on the media in the election and problems with the system of proportional representation provide revealing lenses on the events of the 2000 election and call attention to major problems in the U.S. system of representational democracy.

MEDIA SPECTACLE AND REPRESENTATION IN ELECTION 2000

We mortals hear only the news and know nothing at all.
Homer

The 2000 U.S. presidential election, one of the closest and most hotly contested ever, was from start to finish a media spectacle. Despite predictions that the Internet was on its way to replacing television as the center of the information system, TV in the 2000 U.S. election was perhaps more influential than ever. The proliferation of television channels on cable and satellite systems multiplied political discourse and images, with several presenting round-the-clock political news and discussion. These cable news channels were organized as forms of media spectacle, with highly partisan representatives of both sides engaging opposed positions in dramatic and combative competition. The fight for ratings intensified the entertainment factor in politics, fueling the need to generate compelling political spectacle to attract audiences.

The result was unending television discussion programs with commentators lined up for the Republicans or Democrats, as hosts pretended to be neutral, but often sided with one candidate or another. Of the twenty-four-hour cable news channels, it was clear that the Rupert Murdoch–owned Fox network was unabashedly pro-Republican, and it appeared that the NBC-owned cable networks MSNBC and CNBC were also partial toward Bush. CNN and the three major networks claimed to maintain neutrality, although major studies of television and press coverage of the election indicated that the media on the whole tended to favor Bush, as I argue below.

By all initial accounts, it would be a close election, and both sides tried to spin the media furiously, getting their "message of the day" and a positive image of their candidate on screen or into the press. Both sides provided the usual press releases and sent out e-mail messages to the major media and their supporters, which their opponents would then attempt to counter. The competing campaigns also constructed elaborate Web sites that contained their latest "messages," video clips of the candidates, and other information on the campaigns.² Both sides staged frequent photo opportunities, saturated the airwaves with ads, and attempted to sell their candidate to the voters.

Throughout the summer, there was not much focus on the campaigns among the public at large until the political conventions took place, where both parties traditionally gathered and produced spectacles to provide positive images of their candidate and party. The Republicans met first, in Philadelphia from July 31 to August 3, filling their stage with a multicultural display of their supporters, leading pundits to remark that more people of color appeared on stage than were in the audience of the lily white conservative party that had not been friendly to minorities.

The Democrats met in Los Angeles in mid-August and created carefully planned media events to show off their stars, the Clintons and the Gores, with Al and Tipper's long kiss the most circulated image of the event. For the first time, however, major television networks declared that the political party conventions were not important news stories, but were merely partisan events, and they severely cut back on prime-time coverage allotted the spectacles. In particular, NBC and the Fox network broadcast baseball and entertainment shows rather than convention speeches during the early days of both conventions, and all networks cut back coverage to a minimum. CBS's Dan Rather, for instance, dismissed the conventions as "four-day infomercials"—advertisements for the parties and their candidates (CBS News, August 15).

Nonetheless, millions of people watched the conventions, and both candidates got their biggest polling boosts after their respective events, thus suggesting that the carefully contrived media displays were able to capture an audience and perhaps shape viewer perceptions of the candidates. After the conventions, no major stories emerged and not much media attention was given to the campaigns during the rest of August and September in the period leading up to the presidential debates. The Gore campaign seemed to be steadily rising in the polls while the Bush candidacy floundered.³

During September, the Bush campaign appeared to be floundering. The relatively inexperienced candidate was caught on open mike referring to a *New York Times* reporter as a "major-league asshole," with Bush's vice presidential choice, Dick Cheney, chiming in "big time." While the Bush team publicly proclaimed that it would not indulge in negative campaigning, a television ad appeared attacking Gore and the Democrats that highlighted the phrase "RATS." Critics accused the Bush campaign of attempting to associate the vermin with

DemocRATS/bureaucRATS. Bush denied that his campaign had produced this "subliminal" message (in his creative mispronunciation) at the same time that an adman working for him was bragging about it.

Moreover, as the camps haggled about debate sites and dates, it appeared that Bush was being petulant, refusing the forums suggested by the neutral debate committee and was perhaps afraid to get into the ring with the formidable Gore. Since the 1960s the presidential debates have become popular media spectacles that are often deemed crucial to the election. Hence, as the debates began in October, genuine suspense arose and significant sectors of the populace tuned in to the three events between the presidential candidates and single disputation between the competing vice presidents. Consequently, on the whole, the debates were dull, in part because host Jim Lehrer asked unimaginative questions that simply allowed the candidates to feed back their standard positions on Social Security, education, Medicare, and other issues that they had already spoken about day after day. Neither Lehrer nor others involved in the debates probed the candidates' positions or asked challenging questions on a wide range of issues from globalization and the digital divide to poverty and corporate crime that had not been addressed in the campaign. Frank Rich described the first debate in the *New York Times* as a "flop show," while Dan Rather on CBS called it "pedantic, dull, unimaginative, lackluster, humdrum, you pick the word."⁴

In Election 2000, commentators on the debates tended to grade the candidates more on their performance and style than on substance, and many believe that this strongly aided Bush. In the postmodern image politics of the 2000 election, style became substance as both candidates endeavored to appear likable, friendly, and attractive to voters. In the presidential debates when the candidates appeared mano a mano to the public for the first time, not only did the media commentators focus on the form and appearance of the candidates, rather than the specific positions they took, but the networks frequently cut to "focus groups" of "undecided" voters who presented their stylistic evaluations. After the first debate, for instance, commentators noted that Gore looked "stiff" or "arrogant" while Bush appeared "likable." And after the second debate, Gore was criticized by commentators as too "passive," and then too "aggressive" after the third debate, while critics tended to let Bush off the hook.

It was, however, the spectacle of the three presidential debates and the media framing of these events that arguably provided the crucial edge for Bush. At the conclusion of the first Bush–Gore debate, the initial viewer polls conducted by CBS and ABC declared Gore the winner. But the television pundits seemed to score a victory for Bush. Bob Schieffer of CBS declared, "Clearly tonight, if anyone gained from this debate, it was George Bush. He seemed to have as much of a grasp of the issues" as Gore. His colleague Gloria Borger agreed, "I think Bush did gain." CNN's Candy Crowley concluded, "They held their own, they both did.... In the end, that has to favor Bush, at least with those who felt . . . he's not ready for prime time."⁵

Even more helpful to Bush was the focus on Gore's debate performance. Gore was criticized for his sighs and style (a "bully," declared ABC's Sam Donaldson) and was savaged for alleged misstatements. The Republicans immediately spun that Gore had "lied" when he told a story of a young Florida girl forced to stand in class because of a shortage of desks. The school principal of the locale in question denied this, and the media had a field day, with a Murdoch-owned *New York Post* boldface headline trumpeting "LIAR! LIAR!" Subsequent interviews indicated that the girl *did* have to stand and that there *was* a desk shortage, and testimony from her father and a

picture confirmed this, but the spin was on that Gore was a "liar." Moreover, Gore had misspoken during the first debate in a story illustrating his work in making the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) more efficient, claiming that he had visited Texas with its director after a recent hurricane. As it turns out, although Gore had played a major role in improving FEMA had frequently traveled with its director to crisis sites, and while he had been to Texas after the hurricane, the fact that he had not accompanied the director in the case cited accelerated claims that Gore was a "serial exaggerator," or even liar, who could not be trusted.

This Republican mantra was repeated throughout the rest of the campaign, and whereas the press piled on Gore every time there was a minor misstatement, critics argued that Bush was able to get away with whoppers in the debate and on the campaign trail on substantial issues.⁶ For example, when he claimed in a debate with Gore that he was for a "patients' bill of rights" that would allow patients to sue their HMOs for malpractice, in fact, Bush had blocked such policies in Texas and opposed a bill in Congress that would allow patients the right to sue. And few critics skewered Bush over the misstatement in the second debate, delivered with a highly inappropriate smirk, that the three racists who had brutally killed a black man in Texas were going to be executed. In fact, one had testified against the others and had been given a life sentence in exchange; moreover, because all cases were under appeal it was simply wrong for the governor to claim that they were going to be executed, since this undercut their right of appeal. The media also had given Bush a pass on the record number of executions performed under his reign in Texas, the lax review procedures, and the large number of contested executions where there were questions of mental competence, proper legal procedures, and even evidence that raised doubts about Bush's execution of specific prisoners.

Thus, although a fierce debate over prescription drugs in the first debate led to allegations by Gore that Bush was misrepresenting his own drug plan, driving Bush to assault Gore verbally, the media did not bother to look and see that Bush had misrepresented his plan and that Gore was correct, despite Bush's impassioned denials, that seniors earning more than \$25,000 a year would get no help from Bush's plan for four or five years. Moreover, after the third and arguably decisive presidential debate, the MSNBC commentators and punditry were heavily weighted toward pro-Bush voices. In questioning Republican vice presidential candidate Dick Cheney about the third debate, Chris Matthews lobbed an easy question to him attacking Al Gore; moments later when Democratic House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt came on, once again Matthews assailed Gore in his question! Pollster Frank Luntz presented a focus group of "undecided" voters, the majority of which had switched to Bush during the debate and who uttered primarily anti-Gore sentiments when interviewed (MSNBC forgot to mention that Luntz is a Republican pollster). Former Republican Senator Alan Simpson was allowed to throw barbs at Gore, to the delight and assent of host Brian Williams, while there was no Democrat allowed to counter the Republican in this segment. The pundits, including Matthews, former Reagan-Bush speechwriter and professional Republican ideologue Peggy Noonan, and accused plagiarist Mike Barnacle, all uttered pro-Bush messages, while the two more liberal pundits provided more balanced analysis of the pros and cons of both sides in the debate, rather than just spin for Bush.

Gore was on the defensive for several weeks after the debates, and Bush's polls steadily rose.⁷ Moreover, the tremendous amount of coverage of the polls no doubt helped Bush. While Gore had been rising in the polls from his convention up until the debates, occasionally

experiencing a healthy lead, the polls were favorable to Bush from the conclusion of the first debate until the election. Almost every night, the television news opened with the polls, which usually showed Bush ahead, sometimes by 10 points or more. As the election night results would show, these polls were off the mark but they became *the* story of the election as the November 7 vote approached.

The polls were indeed one of the scandals of what some felt was shameful media coverage of the campaign. Arianna Huffington mentioned in a November 2, 2000, syndicated column that on a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll released at 6:23 p.m. on Friday, October 27, George W. Bush was proclaimed to hold a 13-point lead over Al Gore; in a CNN/Time poll released around two hours later that night at 8:36 p.m., Bush's lead was calculated to be 6 points. When Huffington called the CNN polling director, he declared that the wildly divergent polls were "statistically in agreement . . . given the polls' margin of sampling error." The polling director explained that with a margin of error of 3.5 percent, either candidate's support could be 3.5 percent higher or lower, indicating that a spread of as much as 20 points could qualify as "statistically in agreement," thus admitting that the polls do not really signify much of anything, as in fact election night results showed.

The polls were thus highly problematic during the 2000 campaign. Poll fatigue had set in with the public, and, as Huffington noted in her syndicated column cited above, the major polling organizations admitted that they were getting a less than 50 percent response rate. Moreover, the national polls were irrelevant, because in an Electoral College system, it is the number of states won that is the key to victory, and not national polling figures. In fact, the Electoral College system, in which the candidate who gets the most votes in a state wins the state and the candidate who wins the most states wins the election, would come under attack during the intense Battle for the White House in the Florida Recount Wars. For Gore won more than half a million votes than Bush, many states that were very close were won by Bush, so a more proportional voting system would reflect better the will of the people, as many reformers argued.⁸

Despite all their flaws, network news coverage focused on the polls, or the strategies, mechanics, and ups and downs of the campaigns, rather than the key issues or the public's real concerns. With a shrinking amount of news coverage on the major network news, and soundbites in which news and information were condensed into even smaller fragments, media focus on the horse race and strategic dimension of the presidential campaigns meant that less and less time would be devoted to discussion of issues, the candidates, and the stakes of the election.

In this environment, the campaigns sought to create positive images of their candidates through daily photo opportunities and television ads, thus contributing to intensification of a superficial politics of the image. The television ads presented positive spectacles of the candidates' virtues and negative spectacles of their opponents' flaws. Contested states such as Florida were saturated with wall-to-wall advertising, and consequently Election 2000 campaign costs were the highest in history in which a record \$3 billion was dispersed. The ads were closely scrutinized for distortion, exaggerations, and lies, with Internet Web-zines such as *Slate* and some television networks providing regular analysis of the ads, while television networks replayed and closely analyzed the more controversial ones.⁹

Both candidates ran intense phone campaigns. Republican voters could be thrilled to get a prerecorded call from George W. Bush himself, telling them that he wanted their votes. On the

Democratic side, there was a late-campaign barrage of prerecorded telephone calls to black voters from Bill Clinton, while Ed Asner recorded a call to be sent to seniors in Florida warning them about Bush's Social Security program. Of course, Hollywood celebrities and rock stars also campaigned for the candidates. Gore used his Harvard roommate Tommy Lee Jones, *West Wing* President Martin Sheen, and an array of young Hollywood stars to campaign for him, while Bush used Bo Derek and members of the Hollywood right such as Bruce Willis.

Yet it was perhaps late-night comics and *Saturday Night Live*, the longtime satirical NBC show, that most pungently exemplified the continued importance of television to electoral politics and that also made clear that contemporary U.S. politics *is* media spectacle. The comics had a field day satirizing the know-nothing smiling papa's boy "Dubya" (aka W., or Shrub, the little Bush) and AlGore, the stiff and pompous senator from Tennessee. Likewise, *Saturday Night Live* ridiculed the candidates after the debates in segments that were widely circulated and repeated frequently on nightly news as well as on a preelection special, giving rise to the claim that the *SNL* piece was the "most important political writing of the year".¹⁰

The *Saturday Night Live* satire symmetrized Bush and Gore as dim lightbulbs, who were equally ludicrous. The presentations of Gore in particular were arguably inaccurate and defamatory, depicting the intelligent and articulate vice president and author as slow-talking, clichéd, and bumbling. It is true that Gore tended to dumb down his discourse for the debates and repeated certain phrases to make key points, but the satire arguably distorted his speech patterns and mannerisms, which were nowhere near as slow and lumbering as in the satire. These often-repeated satires were perhaps as important as Republican attack ads in creating a negative public image of Gore. Their constant reiteration on the NBC news channels provided not only advertisements for the popular Saturday night television show, but unpaid attack ads for the Republicans.

Bush's turnaround in the polls in October after his numbers had been steadily dipping for weeks was seemingly boosted by what was perceived as his successful appearance on the debates and on popular talk shows, such as *Oprah*, where an image of the much-beloved African American talk hostess giving him a smooch was widely circulated. Some claimed that the talk shows were a natural for the more relaxed Bush, although there were debates over whether his appearance on the *David Letterman Show* hurt or helped his efforts, as he appeared giddy and was unable to answer effectively the tough questions Letterman posed.

In any case, both candidates made appearances on the major late-night talk shows, as well as other popular television venues previously off-limits to presidential candidates. In general, television spectacle helps to boost the chances of the most telegenic candidate, and according to media commentary, Bush repeatedly scored high in ratings in "the likability factor." Polls continued to present Bush as more popular than Al Gore, and most media commentators predicted that he would win the election handily.¹¹ (Kellner, 2001).

MEDIA BIAS IN THE REPRESENTATIONS OF BUSH AND GORE

You've heard Al Gore say he invented the Internet. Well, if he was so smart, why do all the addresses begin with "W"?

George W. Bush

In the postmodern politics of promotion, candidates are packaged as commodities, marketed as a brand name, and sold as a bill of goods. In a presidential race, campaigns are dominated by image consultants, advertising mavens, spin doctors, and political operatives who concoct daily photo opportunities to make the campaign look appealing, "messages" sound attractive, and "events" present the candidates in an attractive format. Such campaigns are, of course, expensive and require tremendous budgets that make competing impossible for candidates without access to the megafortunes needed to run a media politics campaign. In turn, such megaspectacles render politicians beholden to those who cough up the massive amount of dollars to pay for the extravaganzas and the vast apparatus of producers, spinners, and operatives to create them.

Bush's brand name was his family trademark, son of the former president and Bush dynasty heir apparent, with his own distinctive "compassionate conservatism." The latter phrase shows the bogus and spurious nature of presidential packaging, as there is little "compassion" in the record of the Texas governor who executed a record number of prison inmates, who cut welfare lists and social programs, and who promised more of the same on the national level.¹² In the politics of presidential marketing, however, creation of image takes precedence over ideas, style replaces substance, and presentation trumps policy. With politics becoming a branch of marketing, the more marketable candidate is easier to sell. Thus, it is not surprising that Bush's image, style, and presentation trumped Gore's ideas, experience, and policies with large segments of the public.

Bush had another major asset in the competition for votes and marketing of the candidates. Cultural historians make distinctions between "character," based on one's moral fiber and history of behavior, and "personality," which has to do with how one presents oneself to others.¹³ The new culture of personality emphasizes charm, likability, attractiveness, and the ability to present oneself in positive images. Bush was clearly Mr. Personality, instantly likable, a hale-fellow-well-met and friendly glad-hander who was able to charm audiences. He was becoming a media celebrity whose qualifications to be president were rarely probed by the mainstream corporate media, but he was able to play effectively the "presidential contender" and provide a resonant personality. Moreover, Bush was able to transmit his likable qualities via television, whereas Gore frequently had more difficulty in coming across as personable and translating his considerable intelligence and experience into easily consumable sound-bites and images.¹⁴

The Texas governor, who was to many more a figure of personality than character, was also able to turn the "character issue" -- with the complicity of the press -- against Gore and convince audiences that he, George W. Bush, was a man of "character" as well as personality. The Bush camp used the term "character" as a code word to remind audiences of the moral lapses of Bill Clinton and of Gore's association with the president, in a sustained collapse of one into the other. The Bush campaign also systematically attacked Gore's character and credibility, and the media bought into this (see Kellner, 2001, and Alterman, 2003).

Furthermore, Bush, more than the deadly serious and policy-oriented Gore (demeaned as a "wonk" by many), was entertaining; he was amusing and affable in debates, even if not commanding in argumentation and substantive position. Like Ronald Reagan, Bush looked good on the run, with a friendly smile and wave, and in general seemed able to banter and connect with his audiences better than Gore. Bush's misstatements and errors were amusing, and on late-night talk shows he poked fun at himself for his mispronunciations and gaffes; *Slate* compiled a list of

"Bushisms," and they were as entertaining as David Letterman's Top Ten list and Jay Leno's nightly NBC monologue, which often made jokes about Gore and Bush.

Moreover, large sectors of the media despised Gore and tended to like Bush. As Eric Alterman notes:

The intensity of the media's anti-Gore obsession is a bit bizarre, but even more so, given the strictures of journalistic objectivity, is the lack of compunction they feel about openly demonstrating it. At an early New Hampshire debate between Gore and Bill Bradley, reporters openly booed him, "objectivity" be damned. "The 300 media types watching in the press room at Dartmouth were, to use the appropriate technical term, totally grossed out," *Time* reported. "Whenever Gore came on too strong, the room erupted in a collective jeer, like a gang of fifteen-year-old Heathers cutting down some hapless nerd."

Washington Post White House reporter Dana Milbank offers this reasoned, mature explanation: "Gore is sanctimonious, and that's sort of the worst thing you can be in the eyes of the press. And he has been disliked all along, and it was because he gives a sense that he's better than us--he's better than everybody, for that matter, but the sense that he's better than us as reporters. Whereas President Bush probably is sure that he's better than us--he's probably right, but he does not convey that sense. He does not seem to be dripping with contempt when he looks at us, and I think that has something to do with the coverage."

Bill Keller, who almost became executive editor of the *New York Times*, was no less scholarly than Milbank, but like any good pundit, multiplied his own resentments by 50 million. "One big reason 50 million voters went instead for an apparent lightweight they didn't entirely trust was that they didn't want to have Al Gore in their living rooms for four years," Keller wrote on the paper's Op-Ed page. Included in his argument was the behavior of his 3-year-old, who, during the 2000 campaign, "went around chanting the refrain: 'Al Gore is a snore.'" Imagine where she might have learned to do that!

During the 2000 election, both the *Times* and the *Post* assigned reporters to Gore who hated his guts and so repeatedly misled their readers. Katharine Seelye's and Ceci Connolly's coverage turned out to be so egregious that the two were singled out by the conservative *Financial Times* of London as "hostile to the [Gore] campaign," unable to hide their "contempt for the candidate." (And don't get me started on the topic of "Panchito" Bruni's daily valentines to George W. during this period, carried on page one of the Paper of Record [i.e. *The New York Times*]).¹⁵

The American public seems to like entertaining and interesting politicians and politics and to sometimes resent media critiques of politicians they like. Hence, when stories broke a few days before the election that Bush had been arrested twenty years before on a DWI charge and had since covered this over and even lied about it, the populace and polls did not punish him. When asked of highs and lows of the campaign on election night, Bush said with his trademark smirk that even the lows "turned out to be good for us," alluding to polls that indicate that Bush got a rise in popularity after revelations of his drunk driving charge. As with Clinton's survival of his

sex scandals and the Republican impeachment campaign, it seems as if the public empathizes with the politicians' foibles and resents moral indictments of at least those with whom voters sympathize. Obviously, Clinton was a highly empathetic personality whom voters could sympathize with, and many resented the Republican moral crusade against him. Similarly, voters liked Bush and seemed not to be affected by the embarrassing disclosure of his DWI record and its longtime cover-up.¹⁶

Talk radio was an important medium during the campaign, just as it had been over the last decade in U.S. politics. It was the relatively new form of unrestrained talk radio that first mobilized conservatives against Bill Clinton after his election in 1992, providing a basis of indignation and anger that fueled the circulation of the details of the Clinton sex scandal and generated support for his impeachment. Of course, the very excesses of rightwing talk radio provided a backlash, and some stations chose liberals to counter the conservative hosts, but most liberal programs were soon cancelled and by 2000 rightwing hosts completely dominated talk radio.

Indeed, during Election 2000 and the ensuing struggle for the presidency, rightwing talk radio had a comeback, energizing its old audience and finding new ones, while projecting the hatred of Clinton onto Gore. The narcissistic and demagogic Rush Limbaugh, who had mercifully been taken off television because of declining ratings and who had seemed to disappear from the frontstage of national mainstream media, reappeared in all his virulent unglory, frequently appearing on NBC channels, which rehabilitated the discredited demagogue to celebrity and credibility.¹⁷ Limbaugh and other rightwing blowhards grew louder and more aggressive than ever, demonizing Gore and mobilizing conservative constituents to vote for Bush, helping as well to organize against the Democrat candidate once the post-election struggle for the presidency erupted.

Moreover, and importantly, major research studies of the nexus between media and politics revealed that both the broadcast media and the press were pro-Bush and that this bias perhaps won the Republican enough votes ultimately to wrest the election victory from Gore and the Democrats (although, of course, many maintain that the election was stolen and that Gore had won the plurality of Electoral College votes, as well as the popular vote). A study by the Pew Research Center and the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) examined 2,400 newspaper, television, and Internet stories in five different weeks between February and June 2000, and indicated that 76 percent of the coverage included one of two themes: that Gore lies and exaggerates or is marred by scandal. The most common theme about Bush, the study found, is that he is a "different kind of Republican." A follow-up PEJ report concluded:

In the culminating weeks of the 2000 presidential race, the press coverage was strikingly negative, and Vice President Al Gore has gotten the worst of it, according to a new study released today by the Committee of Concerned Journalists.

Gore's coverage was decidedly more negative, more focused on the internal politics of campaigning and had less to do with citizens than did his Republican rival.

In contrast, George W. Bush was twice as likely as Gore to get coverage that was positive in tone. Coverage of the governor was also more issue-oriented and more likely to be directly connected to citizens.

These are some of the key findings of a major new study of press coverage in newspapers, television and on the Internet during key weeks in September and October.¹⁸

Hence, the early coding of Gore in the mainstream media was that he tended to exaggerate and even lie and was implicated in many scandals in the Clinton administration, while the media bought the Bush line that he was a different type of Republican, a "compassionate conservative," and "a reformer with results" who worked with Democrats and Republicans in Texas "to get things done." When the election would heat up in the fall, the Bush campaign would exploit these motifs, and the mainstream media would generally go along with this line, without serious investigation of Bush's record or his own exaggerations and misstatements.¹⁹

One of the most utilized examples of Gore the liar and "serial exaggerator" was the alleged claim that he had invented the Internet. In fact, Gore had made no such claim, although the media, the Republican spinners, and Bush himself constantly referred to this urban myth. Bush burst out in one of the debates that "his opponent" claimed to "have invented the Internet" and then smirked in contempt and during the election often repeated the joke, caught many times in news footage: "You've heard Al Gore say he invented the Internet. Well, if he was so smart, why do all the addresses begin with 'W'?"

This lie about Gore, and Bush's systematic exploitation of the myth, speaks volumes about the quality of the Bush campaign and media complicity in its spin. First, it is simply untrue that Gore claimed he "invented" the Internet.²⁰ Second, it is interesting how Bush and his handlers utilized the "W" as a trademark to distinguish Bush from his father and how Bush became popularly identified as W., or the Texas-inflected "Dubya." Whereas JFK's initials were an apt summary of his style and achievements, and LBJ earned the gravity of his initials through many years in the Senate, culminating in becoming Senate Majority leader, then gaining the vice presidency and presidency, George W. Bush was popularly referred to as "W.," an empty signifier that really didn't stand for anything in particular, although had the media probed the infamous "W" they would have discovered a truly spectacular story.

In fact, the "W" in Bush Junior's name referred to Herbert Walker, the father of the woman, Dorothy Walker, who George W. Bush's grandfather, Prescott Bush, married (the H.W. in Bush senior's name referred to Herbert Walker, pointing to the largely unknown origins of Bush family power and money). While the mainstream media investigated and widely discussed any slightly scandalous aspect of Gore family history, they neglected the much more colorful Bush family history. For example, Prescott Bush managed the bank that helped fund Hitler and the Nazis, while Herbert Walker, Prescott Bush's close business associate, helped run businesses for Stalin's Russia and Mussolini's Italy, as well as Hitler's Germany.²¹ One of the scandals of Election 2000 is that the press did not press into Bush family history and its unsavory connections and activities, but largely focused on the day-to-day campaign activities and daily spins of the candidates, how they were faring in the polls, and the personalities of the candidates.

Bush's appeal was predicated on his being "just folks," a "good guy," like "you and me." Thus, his anti-intellectualism and lack of intellectual gravity, exhibited every time he opened his mouth and mangled the English language, helped promote voter identification. As a sometime Republican speechwriter Doug Gamble once mused, "Bush's shallow intellect perfectly reflects an increasingly dumbed-down America. To many Americans Bush is 'just like us,' a Fox-TV President for a Fox-TV society."²²

The media rarely challenged Bush who seemed to have not only charmed large sectors of the American public, but was effective in schmoozing the media. Another survey released of press coverage after the conventions showed a decisive partiality for Bush. The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) study of television election news coverage before, during, and after the conventions (released on August 14) concluded, "Network evening news coverage of the GOP convention was more favorable toward George W. Bush, while Al Gore received mostly unfavorable TV references, according to a new study released by the CMPA." The study also found that "Bush has received more favorable coverage than Gore throughout the 2000 campaign, reversing a trend that favored Bill Clinton over his GOP opponents in 1992 and 1996."²³

Surprisingly perhaps, Bush fared as well with the print media and establishment press as with television. Supporting the studies of pro-Bush bias, Charlie Peters reported in the *Washington Monthly* that according to the PEJ studies, the *New York Times* front page "carried nine anti-Gore articles and six anti-Bush; 12 pro-Gore and 21 pro-Bush" (November 2000). Howard Kurtz, media critic of the *Washington Post*, reported: "Those who believe the media were easier on Bush will find some support in a new Project for Excellence in Journalism study. Examining television, newspaper, and Internet coverage from the last week in September through the third week in October, the report says Bush got nearly twice as many stories as Gore" (November 6, 2000). Moreover, only one in ten of the pieces analyzed the candidates' policy differences, with two-thirds focusing on the candidates' performance, strategy, or tactics. Twenty-four percent of the Bush stories were positive, compared to 13 percent for Gore, while the Bush stories focused more on issues than character or campaign strategy.

A German group, Media Tenor, also documented a persistent anti-Gore and pro-Bush bias in mainstream media presentation of the candidates.²⁴ Thus three different research projects found strong media bias in the election coverage. To be sure, such "positive" and "negative" scoring of images and discourses is difficult, debatable, and not always completely accurate, but I would argue that even more significant than alleged bias in new stories in the mainstream media is the preponderance of conservative punditry and, even more significant, the exclusion of widespread media documentation and discussion of key aspects of George W. Bush's life, record in business and government, and obvious lack of qualifications for the presidency.

In his 1992 book *Fooling America*, Robert Parry documents the pack journalism of the mainstream media in the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that the horde follows "conventional wisdom," recycling the dominant and predictable opinions, while failing to pursue stories or develop positions outside of or against the prevailing views of the day. During Campaign 2000, journalists on the whole tended to accept the line of the Bush campaign concerning Gore's purported negatives while promoting the view that the Bush camp advanced that Bush was a uniter, not a divider, a "compassionate conservative," and someone who pursued "bipartisan" politics in order "to get things done."

Clearly, media pundits tended to favor Bush over Gore. As Eric Alterman demonstrated in *Sound and Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy* (revised, 2000), conservatives had trained a cadre of media commentators, well versed in the art of sound-bite and staying on message, and there were many, many more conservatives than liberals on the airwaves. The conservative punditocracy trashed Gore daily, while Bush escaped critical scrutiny of his record in Texas, his limited experience, his problematic proposals, and his almost daily misstatements. The

conservative pundits, however, aggressively promoted the Republican message of the day and served as ubiquitous shock troops for the Bush machine.

It is generally acknowledged, as this study argues, that the media were strongly biased toward Bush. The bias in the mainstream media favoritism toward Bush not only came through in how the media presented and framed the two opposing candidates, but in how they failed 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. None of the many newspaper, magazine, and television reports on the Bush and Gore family history mentioned the reports on the origins of the Bush dynasty fortune in a bank that financed German fascism or pursued the Bush family financial scandals that continued through Jeb, Neil, and George W. Bush.²⁵

There was also no probing of the Bush family involvement during Election 2000 in the savings and loan (S&L) scandal, arguably one of the biggest financial debacles in U.S. history, costing U.S. taxpayers over half a trillion dollars to bail out the failed S&L institutions which had gone on a spending orgy after deregulation in the early 1980s. George H. W. Bush and James Baker were instrumental in the deregulation of the industry during the Reagan administration, and their families and friends had bought up and looted S&Ls, including the Silverado S&L scandal involving Neil Bush (see Brewton, 1992).

There was also little coverage of the political scandals that Bush senior had been involved in, such as the Iran-Contra scandal, the U.S. arming of Saddam Hussein, or the misdeeds of the CIA under Bush's directorship (see Kellner 1990 and 1992; Parry 1962). In addition, there was almost no reporting on George W. Bush's personal or financial history, which included reports of using favoritism to get out of military service and then going AWOL, failing to complete his military reserve service. There was little discussion of his checkered business career, including allegations that his father's friends bailed out his failing oil industry and that he then unloaded his own stock in the Harken energy company that had bailed him out, selling before revelations of a bad financial report and failing to report the sale to the Securities and Exchange Commission, giving rise to charges of "insider trading." Bush's poor record as Texas governor was also not probed, nor were his personal failings and inexperience that should have disqualified him from serving as president.

Books, articles, and easily accessible Internet sites document the entire scandalous history of George W. Bush and his dubious dynasty, but lazy and incompetent functionaries of the mainstream media failed to probe this rich mine of material and scandals —whereas there were few embarrassments or negative aspects of Al Gore's past that were not mined and endlessly discussed on talk radio and among conservative television punditry. Likewise, there were few in-depth discussions of the record of Bush's vice-presidential choice Dick Cheney, the major role he would play in a Bush White House, and his precarious health. Cheney had one of most hardright voting records in Congress and was heavily involved in the oil industry as CEO of Halliburton industries, one of the worst polluters and most ruthless corporations in an industry known for its hardball Robber Barons.²⁶

Bush thus benefited significantly from media coverage of Election 2000; major empirical and journalistic studies suggest that the media were heavily prejudiced in his favor and I have argued that Bush also benefited by the domination of conservative punditry and failure to investigate adequately his history, record and qualifications, the scandals that his family has been involved

in, and the record of his running mate Dick Cheney, one of the most hardright political operatives of the present era. There had been little investigative reporting on Bush and a preponderance of favorable stories for Bush and unfavorable ones for Gore, as evidenced in the CMPA, PEW, and Media Tenor studies cited above. Likewise, television pundits seemed to favor Bush over Gore. Media critic David Corn noted that commentators such as John McLaughlin, Mary Matalin, Peggy Noonan, and many of the Sunday network talk-show hosts prophesized a sizable Bush victory and tended to favor the Texas governor.²⁷

Yet the election was the closest in history, and election night and the aftermath comprised one of the most enthralling and gripping media spectacles in recent history. Despite the drama of the election and its highly contested aftermath, however, there was little self-criticism of the role of the media in Election 2000 visible in the mainstream media and with the September 11 terror attacks discussion of electoral problems was off the agenda. While there were efforts to reform election finances and voting technology, there were no significant reforms of the U.S. electoral system that appeared to be dysfunctional in Election 2000 with arguable malfunctioning of the media, voter technology, and the democratic system itself (see Kellner, 2001). Discussion of electoral college reform disappeared and no commissions studied the flaws in the U.S. voting system that made possible the problems of Election 2000. Yet the election called attention to the limitations of the U.S. system of democracy and demands sustained reflections on the importance of reforms to revitalize democracy in the United States.

THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE AND PROPORTIONAL VOTING

A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.

James Madison

The confusion and dysfunctionality evident in Election 2000 reveal problems with the arguably outmoded and dangerously undemocratic Electoral College system and the problematical nature of the U.S. system of proportional voting. Many were surprised to learn that the Electoral College involved a system whereby those chosen to vote in the ritual in which the president was chosen did not necessarily have to follow the mandate of the voters in their district. In practice, state legislatures began binding electors to the popular vote, although as was abundantly clear in Election 2000, "faithless electors," electors who vote for whomever they please, were theoretically possible (half of the states attempt to legally bind electors to the choice of voters in their state, but it would still be possible to shift one's vote, an intolerable outcome for a genuinely democratic society and a possibility much discussed in Election 2000). Direct election of senators, in fact, required a constitutional amendment in 1913 because election of the U.S. Senate also originally operated with the mediation of electors who choose senators, rather than through direct voting by the people, which is now the case and which many argued should also be the model for presidential elections. This reform would call for a direct election for the president, without the mediation of electors, as is the case with the House and the Senate.

The current Electoral College system, as critics have maintained, is based on eighteenth-century concerns and is arguably obsolete and in need of systematic reconstruction in the twenty-first century. Initially, the Electoral College was part of a compromise between state and

local government. Allowing electors to choose the president provided guarantees to more conservative politicians who wanted the Electoral College to serve as a buffer between what they perceived as an unruly and potentially dangerous mob and the more educated and civic-minded legislators who could, if they wished, overturn actual votes by the people.

Moreover, the proportional representation system in the Electoral College has serious problems that have come out in the heated debates over Election 2000. Smaller states are disproportionately awarded with Electoral College votes, so that voters in less populated states such as Idaho or Wyoming have more proportionate influence in choosing the president than in states such as California or New York. As Duke University's Alex Keyssar argued in a November 20 *New York Times* op-ed piece, disproportionate weighting of the votes of smaller states violates the principle of one person, one vote that most of us believe in and that, according to a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s, lies at the heart of our democracy. "To say that a vote is worth more in one district than in another would . . . run counter of our fundamental ideas of democratic government," the court announced in 1964. "Legislators," wrote Chief Justice Earl Warren, "represent people, not trees or acres." Yet 18 million people in New York now get 33 electoral votes for the presidency while fewer than 14 million people in a collection of small states also get 33.

Thus, the current system of proportionate state votes where all states get two votes and then the rest are divided according to population is unfair; for example, as Jim Hightower notes, Wyoming's electors and proportionate vote represent 71,000 voters each, while Florida's electors each represent 238,000.²⁸ A more reasonable system would simply allot states proportionate votes according to their populations, so that each vote throughout the nation would be equal in choosing a president. Further problems with the U.S. Electoral College and system of proportional representation involve the winner-take-all rule operative in most states. As the Florida battle illustrates, in a winner-takes-all system 100 percent representation could go to a 50.1 percent majority in state presidential elections (or less if there were more than two candidates, as is increasingly the case in presidential elections). Maine and Nebraska are exceptions, and it would be possible to follow their example and to split presidential state votes proportionately according to the actual percentage of votes candidates get in each separate state, rather than following the winner-take-all rule, where a handful of votes in a state such as Florida gives the entire state, and even the election, to one candidate.

Hence, the Electoral College and U.S. system of proportional representation should be seriously debated and reforms should be undertaken if U.S. democracy is to revitalize itself in the new millennium after its most scandalous debacle. As many have argued, there are strong reasons for proportionate representation in U.S. presidential elections,²⁹ but it arguably should be without electors and with the public directly electing the president in a more proportionately fair and just electoral system, as opposed to a winner-take-all state vote and subsequent ratification by electors. "Electors" are rather mysteriously chosen in any case and could potentially be "faithless" and vote for a candidate not chosen by their state. Other options would be a winner-take-all national popular vote, but this would seem to contradict the desire to have a balance of power among the states and to ascribe the states a significant political role, as was envisaged in the original U.S. Constitution. On the other hand, any number of reforms to the current system could be proposed and should be seriously discussed.

Indeed, for U.S. democracy to work in the new millennium, it should appoint high-level commissions to study how to modernize and update the system of electing the president. Since the political establishment cannot be counted upon to undertake these reforms, it will be necessary for publics — academic, local, and national — to devise reforms for the seriously challenged system of "democracy" in the United States. Furthermore, it is clear that money has corrupted the current electoral system and that finance reform is necessary to avoid continued corruption by lobbies, corporations, and the influence purchasing and peddling that a campaign system fueled by megabucks produces. The current election system financing scheme and millions of dollars needed for a federal election ensure that only candidates from the two major parties have a chance of winning, that only candidates who are able to raise millions of dollars can run, and that those who do run and win are beholden to those who have financed their campaigns—guaranteeing control of the political system by corporations and the wealthy.

In Election 2000, the excessive amount of money pumped into the \$3 billion-plus electoral campaigns guaranteed that neither candidate would say anything to offend the moneyed interests funding the election, assuring that both parties would pitch their campaigns to the middle, avoid controversy, and thus avoid key issues of importance and concern. The ways that expensive campaigns indebt the two major parties to their contributors were obvious in the initial appointments made by the Cheney–Bush transition team, which rewarded precisely those sectors and personnel who most heartily supported the Bush dynasty presidency. Moreover, the Bush administration provided legislative awards for its major contributors, allowed the big corporations that supported them to write Bush administration energy policy, communication policy, and to help draft legislation for deregulation and new laws that served their interests, in effect allowing big contributors to make public policy (see Kellner, 2001, 187ff).

The Clinton administration was also notorious in its fund-raising activities, which it maintained were necessary to compete with Republicans in highly expensive election campaigns. In this situation, the only way to curtail blatant and growing corruption in allowing major contributors to shape public policy is to have dramatic election campaign reform. In 2001, a McCain-Feingold finance reform bill was passed, but it has been continually watered-down and is unlikely to reform U.S. political funding.

Moreover, there is a strong case to go further and argue for public financing of elections. Four states currently allow full public financing for candidates who agree to campaign fund-raising and spending limits (Arizona, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont), and this would be a splendid model for the entire nation. Public financing for elections at local, state, and national levels would only be viable in a media era with free national television, free access to local media, and Internet sites offered to the candidates. Indeed, the television networks should also be required to provide free airtime to presidential candidates to make their pitches, and television paid political advertising should be eliminated (see the elaboration of this argument in Kellner 1990). The broadcasting networks were given a tremendous bonanza when the Federal Communications Commission provided a wealth of spectrum to use for digital broadcasting, doubling the amount of spectrum space it licensed to television broadcasters with estimates of the value of the space ranging up to \$70 billion. Congress failed to establish public service requirements that used to be in place before the Reagan-Bush-Clinton deregulation of telecommunications and as a fair payback for the broadcast spectrum give-away, broadcasting institutions should provide free time for political discourse that strengthens democracy.

To be sure, efforts were made and defeated to get the television networks to provide resources that would enable the public to get messages from the candidates, clearly presenting their positions. President Clinton appointed an advisory panel to assess how to update public service requirements of television broadcasts in the wake of the spectrum giveaway. The panel recommended that television broadcasters voluntarily offer five minutes of candidate-centered airtime in the thirty days before the election. Clinton proposed this recommendation in his 1998 State of the Union address, but broadcasters fiercely rejected the proposal, and in the Senate, John McCain and Conrad Burns announced that they would legislatively block the FCC's free airtime initiative. In fact, political advertising is a major cash cow for the television networks who regularly charge political candidates excessively high rates, although they are supposed to allow "lowest unit charge" (LUC) for political advertising. Such LUC rates, however, mean that the ads could be preempted, and desperate campaigns want to make sure that they get their advertising message out at a crucial time and thus are forced to pay higher rates.³⁰

Obviously, campaign finance reform should require taking a hard look at the role of television advertising and serious consideration of the providing of free television time to major political candidates. A fair election requires that candidates be able to present their ideas to the public and to have a chance to respond to their opponent's criticisms, whether via television ads, interviews, or televised speeches. The current situation of the necessity of high-priced ads in a presidential campaign requires record levels of fund-raising and ensures that money will corrupt the political process.

There is little doubt that U.S. democracy is in serious crisis, and unless there are serious reforms, its decline will accelerate. Although electoral participation increased from an all-time low in 1996 of 49 percent of the eligible electorate to 51 percent in Election 2000, this percentage is still extremely low, putting the United States near the bottom of democratic participation in presidential elections. Obviously, about half of the country is alienated from electoral politics, and the centrist campaigns of both sides in Election 2000, geared toward a mythical center and suburban swing voters and governed by polls and focus groups, were not likely to inspire voters and bring them into the political process. Thus, U.S. democracy remains in crisis and there will probably be no significant reform until a critical mass of people see the flaws of the U.S. system and demand democratic reform.

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NOTES

¹ This study draws upon and expands arguments set out in *Grand Theft 2000* (Kellner, 2001) and draws upon the major books on Election 2000 including Tapper, 2001; Bugliosi, 2001; Dershowitz, 2001; Schechter, 2001; Greenfield, 2001; Miller, 2001; Milbank, 2001; the *Washington Post*, 2001; the *New York Times*, 2001; Simon, 2001; Ceaser and Busch, 2001; Toobin, 2001; Brunei, 2002; and Sabato, 2002.

² In an excellent overview of the role of Internet sites in Election 2000 and issues involved in online politics, see Stephen Coleman, "What Was New? Online Innovation in the 2000 Elections," in Schechter, 2001: 120–33.

³ See the daily commentary on the campaign in Howard Kurtz's media columns archived at www.washingtonpost.com; Millbank 2001: 307ff; and Bruni 2002: 163ff.

⁴ The following analysis is based on videotapes I made of the election and analysis in Kellner, 2001. Pundit quotes and analysis of the first debate are found in Howard Kurtz, *Washington Post* (October 4, 2000).

⁵ See Ceaser and Busch who argue that: "Everything turned around for George Bush during the period of the debates.... It was the cumulative effect of the three debates themselves that carried him past the vice-president and into a modest lead that lasted until the final weekend" (2001, 148-150).

⁶ See the analysis of "Twenty-Five Bush Flubs in the Second Debate" and "Fifteen [Bush] Flubs in the Third Debate" at <http://www.tompaine.com/news/2000/10/20/index.html>. Republican pundits, however, obsessively pursued the theme that Gore was a liar. In the October 11, 2000 *Wall Street Journal*, the grossly overinflated Republican ideologue William Bennett wrote: "Albert Arnold Gore Jr. is a habitual liar. . . . The vice president lies reflexively, promiscuously, even pathologically." In fact, the alleged lies that Gore "promiscuously" promulgated were largely Republican propaganda; see the sources in notes 10 and 11 below.

⁷ A note on polls: The majority of the mainstream media polls on the eve of the election put Bush in the lead, sometimes as much as by 10 points during the final days of the election campaign (although the Zogby/Reuters and CBS News polls put Gore slightly ahead in the popular vote). Joan Didion reports, by contrast, that seven major academic pollsters presenting their data at the September 2000 American Political Science Association convention all predicted a big Gore victory, ranging from 60.3 percent to 52 percent of the vote. See Didion, "In God's Country," *The New York Review of Books* (Nov. 2, 2000). Academic pollsters tend to use rational-choice models and base their results on economic indicators and in-depth interviews; they seem, however, to downplay moral values, issues of character, the role of media spectacle, and the fluctuating events of the election campaigns. Indeed, the academic pollsters argue that the electorate is basically fixed one or two months before the election. Arguably, however, U.S. politics is more volatile and unpredictable and swayed by the contingencies of media spectacle, as Election 2000 and its aftermath dramatically demonstrate.

A story in the *Washington Post* (Feb. 9, 2001) by Robert G. Kaiser, "Experts Offer Mea Culpas for Predicting Gore Win," presents interviews with major political scientists who had predicted a strong win for Gore based on their mathematical models and data collected months before election day, seeing Gore winning from 52.8 to 60.3 percent of the national votes. One professor admitted that the "election outcome left a bit of egg on the faces of the academic forecasters," whereas others blamed a poor Gore campaign, "Clinton fatigue," and an unexpectedly strong showing by Ralph Nader. One defiant forecaster said that the election was simply weird, "on the fringe of our known world, a stochastic [random] shock."

⁸ See the discussion in Kellner 2001: 159ff and below.

⁹ On political ads, see Milbank 2001, 359ff and the study of television advertising by the Alliance for Better Campaigns, in Schechter 2001: 77–92. In an illuminating study of ads in Election 2000, Lynda Lee Kaid argues that Bush's TV ads established eye contact with viewers in 26 percent of his spots compared to only 6 percent for Gore. Bush was three times as likely to be shown with a smiling expression than Gore; and Bush was shown in close-up or tight shots in 41 percent of his ads compared to 24 percent for Gore, thus using video imagery to sell Bush's "personality" to voters. See "Videostyle and Technological Distortions in the 2000 Political Spots," International Communications Association Convention, Washington, D.C., May 2001.

¹⁰ See MSNBC News, November 5 and November 15. For discussion of the *Saturday Night Live* effect, see *Suck* (Nov. 16, 2000), and on comedy and the media, see Marshall Sella, "The Stiff Guy vs. the Dumb Guy," *New York Times* (Sept. 24, 2000).

¹¹ See David Corn's analysis of how pundit predictions tended to call it decisively for Bush over Gore at tompaine.com/news/2000/11/24.

¹² See the following books on Bush's conservative but not compassionate record by Ivins and Dubose (2000), Mitchell (2000), Begala (2000), Hatfield (2000), and Miller (2001).

¹³ See Sussman, 1984 and Gabler, 1999, p. 197.

¹⁴ For an excellent analysis of the qualifications of Gore to be president and lack of substantial achievements and qualifications of Bush, see Alterman, 2003, pp. 148ff.

¹⁵ Eric Alterman, "Al Gore, democrat," The Nation, Oct. 21, 2002. Alterman repeats this analysis in 2003 and writes a whole chapter documenting mainstream media hatred toward Gore and complicity toward Bush (pp. 148-174). His book systematically devastates the myth of the "liberal media," savaging books that make this claim and providing extensive documentation of its nullity.

¹⁶ On Bush's DWI incident and how his campaign and the Gore camp dealt with it, see Timothy J. Burger, "In the Driver's Seat: The Bush DUI," in Sabato, 2002, pp. 69-93.

¹⁷ Rightwing ideologue Rush Limbaugh emerged as "the highest paid info-broadcaster in history," clocking in with \$30 million this year, more than the network anchors combined (<http://www.drudgereport.com/rr.htm>). It was later admitted that Limbaugh was losing his hearing during the election period, providing a revealing image of an aggressive conservatism that feigned dialogue but really wasn't hearing anything except its own ideological voice.

¹⁸ For the PEJ report, see http://www.journalism.org/publ_research/campaign1.html. For a good overview of the PEJ findings and critique of mainstream media news coverage of the election, see Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, "Campaign Lite: Why Reporters Won't Tell Us What We Need to Know," *Washington Monthly* (Jan.–Feb. 2001).

¹⁹ For a wealth of studies of the media and politics of Election 2000 that document these claims, see the Project for Excellence in Journalism (<http://www.journalism.org/>) and the studies in Schechter, 2001. In a Columbia Journalism Review article, "Gore Media Coverage—Playing Hardball," Jane Hall systematically analyzes negative and often misleading coverage of Gore, contrasted to soft and generally uncritical coverage of Bush (September/October 2000). For analyses of distortion of Gore's record and refutations of Republican mantras about his "lying," see Robert Parry's studies "Al Gore v. the Media" (February 1, 2000, www.consortium.com) and in the April 2000 Washington Monthly; the compilation of Bob Somerby's critiques of false Bush campaign claims and the media buying into these at www.dailyhowler.com; Sean Wilentz, "Will Pseudo-Scandals Decide the Election?" The American Prospect, Vol. 11, Issue 21 (September 24, 2000); Eric Boehlert, "Gore's too-willing executioners," Salon, October 27, 2000; Mollie Dickenson, "Who's Lying? Gore or the Media?" www.tompaine.com, October 18, 2000; and Susan Douglas, "Bush's Fifth Column," in *In These Times* (December 25, 2000). The prize for most inept media criticism goes to Camille Paglia who declared "the only thing worse than the candidates this year is the shockingly biased liberal press" (Salon, Dec. 6, 2000), a judgment rendered without one example of liberal bias and in the face of stacks of studies documenting conservative and pro-Bush bias.

²⁰ For convincing demolitions of the allegation that Gore claimed to "invent" the Internet, see "The Red Herring Interview: E-Gore" (*Red Herring*, October 30, 2000). A story in *Wired* falsely reported that Gore asserted that he "invented" the Internet, whereas in fact he had simply stated that "I took the initiative in Congress" to help "create" the Internet, a completely accurate statement that key members of the high-tech community involved in producing the Internet confirmed. The Republicans continued to spread the false smear about Gore, including George W. Bush who baited Gore in a debate with the lie and repeated it constantly in his stump speech. This is an example of Republican use of the "Big Lie" technique, where a falsehood is stated over and over as if it were a

truth, which would come to characterize "Bushspeak" during the Battle for the White House and Bush presidency (see Kellner 2001, chapter 9).

²¹ On Prescott Bush and Herbert Walker's management of National Socialist economic interests, see Tarpley and Chaitkin 1992, 26–44; Loftus and Aarons, 1994, 356-360; and Miller, 2001, 282.

²² Doug Gamble, cited in Martin A. Lee, www.sfbg.com/reality/12.html. See also Jake Tapper's discussion of Bush's "Dumb Chic," *Salon*, Nov. 2, 2000, and Miller's probing analysis (2001). *New York Times* correspondent Frank Bruni's history of Bush and the 2000 election (2002), by contrast, puts on display how Bush seduced the press and while Bruni complains about Bush's superficiality and the shallowness of political campaigns in the media age, his book exhibits the shallowness of the press and political correspondents.

²³ Cited in www.cmpa.com/pressrel/electpr2.htm. The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) is run by Robert Lichter, who has generally been perceived as a conservative critic of the media's liberal bias (although he claims to be a neutral social scientist), so it is interesting that his organization found a bias in favor of Bush. Later CMPA findings indicate that Gore's positive network news coverage went up sharply after the Democratic convention, as did Gore's ratings (Sept. 5, 2000). But a study released by CMPA on October 18 indicated that "network news coverage of Al Gore turned sharply negative after the first presidential debate." It appears that CMPA's positive/negative network news codings of the candidates correlate remarkably with the candidates' rise and fall in the polls, although since polls themselves came under dramatic attack in the election, it is obviously not clear what exact impact positive and negative presentations of candidates on television news and in print have on voters. See also the discussion of positive/negative coding and the work of the German group Media Tenor in Markus Rettich, "Into the White House through the Television Screen," in Schechter 2001: 100–102.

²⁴ See the summary in Schechter, 2001: 100f. and the Web-site www.medien-tenor.de/english/.

²⁵ A Lexis-Nexis search indicated that there were no references to the origins of the Bush family fortune in Union Banking Corporation that financed German National Socialism until an article by Michael Kranish, "Triumphs, Troubles shape generations," *Boston Globe* (April 23, 2001), including the following:

Prescott Bush was surely aghast at a sensational article the *New York Herald Tribune* splashed on its front page in July 1942. "Hitler's Angel Has 3 Million in US Bank" read the headline above a story reporting that Adolf Hitler's financier had stowed the fortune in Union Banking Corp, possibly to be held for "Nazi bigwigs."

Bush knew all about the New York bank: He was one of its seven directors. If the Nazi tie became known, it would be a potential "embarrassment," Bush and his partners at Brown Brothers Harriman worried, explaining to government regulators that their position was merely an unpaid courtesy for a client. The situation grew more serious when the government seized Union's assets under the Trading with the Enemy Act, the sort of action that could have ruined Bush's political dreams.

As it turned out, his involvement wasn't pursued by the press or political opponents during his Senate campaigns a decade later.

Although the Loftus and Aaron's study (1994) provided a well-documented exploration of connections between the bank that helped fund National Socialism and manage its U.S. assets and businesses and the Bush dynasty, this episode was never explored by the U.S. corporate media. Neglect of the unsavory origins of the Bush family fortune and later financial scandals of the Bush family is one of the major journalistic and academic outrages in U.S. history. Indeed, most books and articles on the Bushes are white-washes that repeat the same myths, and there has been little investigative study of the family by the U.S. media, political, and academic establishment. On other Bush family scandals and history, ignored by the mainstream media, see the material listed in Note 25 below.

²⁶ I cite books that document the scandals of Bush family history in notes 12 and 21, above, as well as in the text of this section. Web-sites that document the history of Bush family scandals and George W. Bush's history include www.moldea.com; www.bushwatch.com; <http://prorev.com/bush3.htm>; and www.gwbush.com/. For a useful overview of Cheney's health, history, voting record, and hardright credentials, see Begala 2001: 126–36.

²⁷ See the predictions compiled at tompaine.com/news/2000/11/24.

²⁸ See Jim Hightower's proposals for Electoral College reform at www.alternet.org. In his December 4 online interview, Howard Kurtz noted that Gore would have won the Electoral College if every state received electoral votes in proportion to population: "Bush won 30 states for 271 and Gore won 21 for 267. But if you take away the two electors for each senator, and just apportion electors by number of Representatives (i.e., in proportion to population), Gore wins 225 to 211" ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/liveonline/00/politics/media backtalk120400.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/liveonline/00/politics/media%20backtalk120400.htm)).

²⁹ In a chapter on "Electoral Reform" after election 2000, Ceaser and Busch lay out the case for proportional presentation system, opposed to a direct popular majority vote electoral system, but do not consider the strong arguments that I cite above to eliminate the "unfaithful elector" problem by mandating direct presidential voting, nor do they take seriously arguments against the current U.S. system of proportional voting. In any case, in the current political climate there is little pressure for major electoral reform, although on the local level there have been attempts to require updating of voting machines, streamlining of voting processes, stipulation of recount procedures and other technical changes to avoid the debacle of the Florida nightmare..

³⁰ On the history of efforts to reform television advertising, see Charles Lewis, "You Get What You Pay For: How Corporate Spending Blocked Political Ad Reform & Other Stories of Influence" (Schechter 2001: 62–73) and the Alliance for Better Campaigns, "Gouging Democracy: How the Television Industry Profiteered on Campaign 2000," in Schechter 2001 (77–92). In another important article in Schechter (2001: 75), Lawrence K. Grossman notes that one of broadcasting's "dirty little secrets" is its "sustained and high-priced lobbying against finance reform."

The 2000 U.S. presidential election was one of the most bizarre and fateful in American history. Described in books as a “deadlock,” “thriller,” “the perfect tie,” and even “Grand Theft 2000,” studies of the election have dissected its anomalies and scandals and have attempted to describe and explain what actually happened.¹ In this study, I will analyze how the turn toward media politics and spectacle in U.S. political campaigns and the curious and arguably archaic system of. Proportional voting in the U.S. tilted the campaign toward George W. Bush and were prejudicial to the election of Al G