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Note: **Anomaly highlights** marked in **red** by re-publisher.

[Episode 226. \(Apr. 14, 2012\)](#). Crashes of Convenience:
Michael Connell—Ohio '04 Vote Machine Rigging & Michael
Connell. YouTube. The Corbett Report.

The Mysterious Death of Bush's Cyber-Guru - Michael Connell

Posted by [truth](#) on December 3, 2014 at 4:36pm

Friday, Dec. 19, 2008 01:22PM
(took off at 3:51 pm)

Michael Connell in front of his Piper Saratoga
at College Park Airfield, MD after meeting
with the Knights of Columbus.



[Enhanced. Left Photo: Maxim.com]

122 min. later

Friday, Dec. 19, 2008 05:53 pm

Fire-gutted wreckage of Michael Connell's
Piper Saratoga 2 miles from Akron-Canton
Airport, OH.



Shortly before six o'clock on the evening of December 19, 2008, a man standing outside his home in Lake Township, Ohio heard the whine of an engine in the sky above him.

Moments later two red lights broke through the low clouds, heading almost directly toward the ground. It was a light aircraft, and for a second, as it descended below the tree line, the man thought it would climb back up. Instead, there was a terrible thud, and the sky turned orange. When the fire crews arrived, they found the burning wreckage of a Piper Saratoga strewn across a vacant lot. The plane had narrowly missed a house, but the explosion was so intense that the home's plastic siding was on fire. So was the grass. The pilot had been thrown from the plane and died instantly. Body parts and pieces of twisted metal were scattered everywhere. A prayer book lay open on the ground, its pages on fire.

The crash would have remained a private tragedy confined to the pages of the local press and the hearts of the pilot's widow and four children, but within days the blogosphere was abuzz with rumors and conspiracy theories: The plane, it was said, had been sabotaged and the pilot murdered to cover up the GOP's alleged theft of the Ohio vote in the 2004 presidential election. At the center of this plot was the Saratoga's pilot, a prodigiously gifted IT expert named Michael Connell, whose altar boy charm and technical brilliance had made him the computer whiz of choice for the Republican Party. Left-wing Web sites openly referred to Connell as "Bush's vote rigger" and claimed that his fingerprints were on all the most controversial elections in recent history. There were dark whispers of electronic pulses or sniper fire being used to bring down the plane—a **black ops attack** designed to keep him from testifying against his former cronies. Right-wing bloggers and talk show hosts derided such claims as the twisted delusions of liberal nut jobs and tinfoil hatters. The **mainstream press sat on its hands**.

But while the rumors, innuendos, and allegations continue to swirl through the ether, evidence has recently emerged that suggests the Ohio vote may have been hacked, and that Connell was involved.

Born in 1963 in Peoria, Illinois into a large Irish-American family, Michael Connell was a lifelong Republican and a devout Roman Catholic who went to Mass every day and wore a wristband saying WWJD—What Would Jesus Do? What Connell did was realize the potential of the Internet to shape politics. While still in his 20s, he worked as finance director for Republican Congressman Jim Leach, and as director of voter programs for Senator Dan Coats of Indiana. In 1988 Connell developed a voter contact database for George H. W. Bush, thus inaugurating a long association with the Bush family: Connell worked on Jeb's gubernatorial campaign in Florida in 1998; two years later he was the chief architect of George W. Bush's Web site as Dubya launched his bid for the White House.

But it was while serving as tech guru to Karl Rove that Connell developed his deepest and perhaps most problematic professional relationship. Recruited in the late '80s, Connell became Rove's most trusted cyber lieutenant: a Web wizard who could turn portals into power and who would gain access to the very heights of American politics by the time he reached 30 years old. Connell's two Ohio-based companies, New Media Communications and GovTech, became virtual research and development labs for the Republican Party, building and managing Web sites and e-mail accounts for both Presidents Bush and a long list of leading Republicans. GovTech also designed and managed numerous Congressional IT systems, including those for the House Intelligence and Judiciary committees, putting Connell "behind the fire wall" of some of the most sensitive gov--ernment Web sites from the safety of the Bush White House.

"Mike was known as the GOP's Mister Fix-It," says Stephen Spoonamore, an IT security expert and friend of Connell's. "He built really intelligent tools that allowed people who wanted to win elections do a better job organizing their data." But aside from his more legitimate business, Connell was no stranger to the darker side of American politics. He was forced to resign from Senator Coats' campaign for his involvement in ethical violations. Connell's was also the hand behind the Web site for the notorious Swift Boat Veterans' for Truth smear campaign against John Kerry and GWB43.com, the secret e-mail account used by Rove and dozens of other White House staffers.

Just six weeks before his death, Connell had given a deposition in an Ohio lawsuit that accused Rove, Bush, and Co. of something far more serious than merely scrubbing e-mails: the theft of the 2004 Ohio vote. "This is the biggest scandal in our history," says Mark Crispin Miller, a professor at New York University who has written extensively about electronic voter fraud. "Watergate grew out of a paranoid attempt to disable the opposition. But Ohio was exponentially different. We're talking about a systematic, centralized attempt to rig the voting system."

"We decided to try to bring a racketeering claim against Rove under Ohio law," says Cliff Arnebeck [Clifford O. Arnebeck, Jr.], the attorney who brought the suit, a broad-shouldered man with a Senatorial air dressed in a blue blazer. "We detected a pattern of criminal activity, and we identified Connell as a key witness, as the implementer for Rove."



[Dec. 08, 2004 House Judiciary Committee Hearing. Center: Rev. Jesse Jackson; Right: Clifford O. Arnebeck, Jr. **Dubiously, ALL records of this hearing are missing from both the Senate Judiciary Committee and Government Printing Office websites.**]

By any calculation, the Ohio 2004 election was a black day for American democracy. Lou Harris, known as the "father of modern political polling," and a man not given to hyperbole, called it "as dirty an election as America has ever seen." All the exit polls suggested Ohio would go to Kerry. But when the vote was counted George Bush had won by 132,685 votes, adding Ohio's crucial 20 Electoral College votes to his tally. And putting him, not Kerry, into the White House. It has since been alleged that at

several points on election night, the Ohio secretary of state's official Web site, which was responsible for reporting the results, was being hosted by a server in a basement in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Ohio's secretary of state in 2004 was a fiercely partisan Christian named Ken Blackwell. Blackwell had hired a company called GDC Limited to run the IT systems, which had subcontracted the job to Michael Connell's company, GovTech. Connell had in turn sub-contracted SMARTech, an IT firm based in Chattanooga, to act, it was claimed, as a backup server.

"By looking at the URLs on the Web site, we discovered that there were **three points on election night when SMARTech's computers took over from the secretary of state**," says Arnebeck. "It is during that period that we believe votes were manipulated."

In computer jargon it is known as a man-in-the-middle attack.

"At the time I didn't know who SMARTech were," says IT expert Stephen Spoonamore, opening a file on his computer showing the Internet architecture map of the 2004 Ohio election. He points to a red box in the bottom right-hand corner showing SMARTech's server.

"Then I found out: They host Rove's e-mails. They host the RNC's Web site. They host George Bush's Web site." His voice rises in disbelief.

"I go, 'Holy shit, this is a man-in-the-middle attack! These guys have programmed the state's computers to talk to a company with ties to the Republican Party.' It's brilliant."

With his wiry hair and designer glasses, Spoonamore looks like a character in a Tim Burton movie. A lifelong Republican, he is also one of the world's acknowledged experts on cybersecurity, with a résumé that includes work for the U.S. armed forces and the FBI. In his spare time he has devoted thousands of hours to investigating cyberfraud in American elections. "I know I sound crazy when I talk about this stuff. No one wants to believe it. They say, 'No one would steal an elec--tion.' And I go, 'Yeah, they would. And that's exactly what they did.'"

Spoonamore believes that while Michael Connell may have facilitated electoral fraud, he was really just a tool of more powerful forces. "Mike has been called the Forrest Gump of GOP IT operations," he says. "And I think there's a truth to that. I think he was a good guy surrounded by wolves. He was always going to be the fall guy."

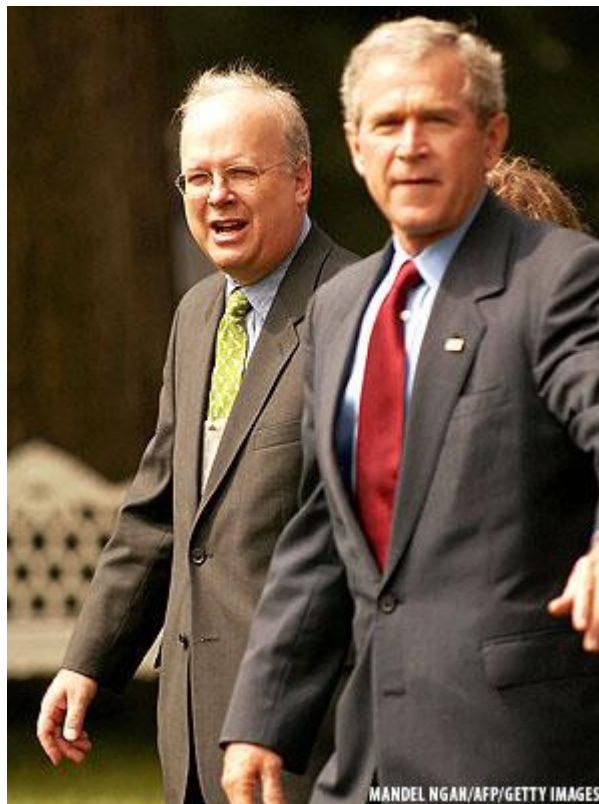
The two men had gotten to know each other at Spoonamore's Washington, D.C. offices in late 2005. "The two of us hit it off," recalls Spoonamore. "We were the same age, the same generation. We had a lot of friends in common." At the end of the meeting, Connell broached a delicate topic. "Mike asked me, 'How easy is it to destroy all records of e-mail?'" recalls Spoonamore. "He sort of gestured toward the White House and said, 'Because I have clients down the street who are working on that problem.' And I stepped back and said, 'If you are talking about White House e-mail destruction, I want nothing to do with it.'"

A year later, at an IT conference in London, Spoonamore confronted the pro-life Connell about the Ohio election: "He said, 'I'm afraid that in my zeal to save the babies, the system I built may have been abused.'"

Three days later, in the back of a cab heading toward the airport, Spoonamore asked Connell if he would be willing to talk to a Congressional judiciary committee about what he knew. "I actually took Mike's hand and said, 'If I can arrange for a private meeting for you to sit down with the committee and explain what you think may have happened in 2004 and how your systems may have been abused, will you do it?' And he said, 'Yes.'"

Connell never did talk to the judiciary committee. But in the months leading up to his death he was under intense pressure. In an attempt to extricate himself from the world of politics, he had sold two of his businesses, including GovTech. Throughout the fall his plane was being tracked by Arnebeck and his associates so they could serve him with a subpoena. Connell sought refuge from the maelstrom in his deep Catholic faith. He took to wearing a scapular, two squares of cloth with religious images favored by devout Catholics, under his shirt. He went to Mass twice a day and became more directly involved with the pro-life movement, spending weekends standing outside abortion clinics. He traveled to Burma and Thailand to work with religious dissidents and started a Catholic charity in El Salvador.

Finally, on October 8, 2008, Connell was served with his subpoena at College Park Airfield outside Washington, D.C. Seven weeks later his Piper Saratoga would fall from the sky.



Karl Rove and George W. Bush.

On December 18, Connell flew to D.C. to meet with the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic men's organization, about starting a new branch and rebuilding their Web site. He stayed the night at a hotel, got up early to attend Mass and then a breakfast meeting. At about 11 a.m., Connell went to College Park Airfield to prepare to fly home to Akron. His firm, New Media Communication, was holding its Christmas party that evening, and he didn't want to miss it. An experienced pilot with more than 500 hours of flight time under his belt, Connell waited for the weather to clear. Shortly after 3:30 p.m., he called his wife, Heather, in Ohio to say he had his "window." He took off at 3:51 p.m.

At first everything went fine. On his approach to Akron-Canton Regional Airport, he asked the tower if there were any reports of icing and was told there were not. It was certainly dark and cold, with cloud cover at 1,000 feet, but the plane had a sophisticated autopilot system that would normally bring it onto the runway, like a homing pigeon. But at 3,200 feet, as Connell began his descent, air traffic control radioed to say he was off course by several miles. Connell radioed that he would correct his position. Something seemed to be wrong with the lateral controls.

The audiotapes of Connell's last communications with the tower suggest a rising sense of panic and confusion. Realizing that he is still off course, he asks to do a 360-degree turn "to reestablish ourselves." It's an unusual maneuver at this late stage of the approach, and the flight controller denies the request. Instead, he advises Connell to "climb and maintain 3,000 feet." Seconds later there is a loud rushing sound as the cockpit bursts open and the engine goes haywire. Connell screams, "Nine nine November declaring an emergency!" Out of respect for his religious beliefs—and his children—the tower reported that his last words were, "Oh, God!" In fact, he cries out, "Oh, fuck!" Then the tape goes dead.

Capt. Lorin Geisner of the Greentown Fire Department was the first person to arrive at the scene. "We received a 911 call, so we contacted the tower and asked what size plane it was and how many souls were on board," he recalls. "But we were informed that the tower was in lockdown and that no information was available."

According to sources, there were other anomalies. Normally, a night crash scene would be roped off and investigated in daylight. In this case representatives of the NTSB and FAA used light towers to photograph and document the scene. Connell's plane was hastily removed to a secure hangar under cover of darkness. By 6 a.m. the investigators had vanished, leaving behind them a trail of debris, and one very angry widow.

"How is this OK?" asks Heather Connell, pulling a chunk of metal from a cardboard box she had brought in from the garage. She is kneeling on the floor of her husband's basement office, a tidy space decorated with sleek black office furniture. A photo of a 25-year-old Connell with George H. W. Bush sits on the bookshelf next to an action figure of Dubya decked out in fighter pilot garb. A cascade of frizzy blonde hair tumbles forward over Heather's face. Her eyes are red from crying. "They think this is part of the foot pedal."

When I ask how she met her husband, she starts to hum the '80s hit "Don't You Want Me." "She was working as waitress in a cocktail bar..." Then her voice falters. "That much is true. We met in Indiana. He was working for Senator Coats, and I was going to college and working at a sports bar. He was with

a bunch of interns who came in. I carded every one of them and was in the process of kicking him out of the bar.” She gives a throaty chuckle. “He was used to people fawning over him, and I think he liked me because I was mean.”

“I didn’t go to the crash site on the night he died,” she says, picking another piece of debris from the box. As her husband began his final descent, Heather and the rest of the staff gathered at a restaurant for the company’s annual Christmas party. “I got a message that his plane had landed,” she recalls, choking back tears. “So I kept calling and calling.” She winces at the memory. “This is making me sick again.” Leaning back in her chair, she takes a drag of a cigarette. “They told me the plane had crashed and that he was dead, but I didn’t want to believe it. I thought maybe he was on the way to the hospital, so I didn’t go to the crash site until December 26.” Her left nostril spasms. “I have pieces of my husband’s brain!” she cries. “I picked them up with my hands six days after the crash. Chunks of his skin and internal organs. How is that a proper investigation? How is that acceptable? How dare they leave pieces of my husband lying there!”

She pulls out another storage box filled with personal items from the crash site: \$50 in cash; a charred prayer book with a note inside it reading, “I love you”; a Mickey Mouse dollar bill. Something important is missing, though. “Why do I have his earpiece?” she asks, pulling out the Jawbone headset of a BlackBerry. “This was in his backpack. And the backpack was zipped. So where’s his phone?”

“He always clips them next to each other,” interjects her 15-year-old daughter, Lauren. It’s an important detail because it suggests that the **BlackBerry may have been intentionally removed from the backpack**. On it were hundreds, if not thousands, of sensitive files and e-mails relating to Karl Rove and the Bush administration.

“I want to know where my husband’s phone is,” Connell says angrily. “It’s my responsibility as a mother and a spouse to find out what happened. And I will not accept ‘Cause of crash unknown.’ I will not.”

Though she is furious at the NTSB, she has no time for the conspiracy theories. While she admits that Connell was disillusioned with politics, she bristles at any suggestion that he could have been involved with vote rigging. “With Mike there was religion, family, and a love for democracy,” she says firmly. “He would never interfere with the democratic process. That’s just ridiculous.”

Connell’s younger sister isn’t so sure. “I knew he worked for the Bushes,” says Shannon Connell. The two siblings had diametrically opposed views—Shannon Connell is a pro-Obama liberal—but they never allowed this to come between them. “We stayed close despite the political differences. He was my brother.”

She doesn’t know whether Connell helped steal elections. If he did, she says, it was because of his passionate anti-abortion views. “I think he was convinced he was doing good—to save the babies,” she says. “That’s the only thing my sisters and I can come up with.

“**Mike had been deposed, but he hadn’t been called as a witness yet,**” she says of the possibility that her brother was murdered. “He was incredibly loyal to the people he worked for, but he would never

have lied under oath. For want of a better expression, I think they played him. His death would have been a really nice Christmas present for Rove and Cheney.

"I am beyond looking for justice," she says, resigned. "I just want the truth to be known. But I am not counting on it." She may be right.

After more than nine months, the factual report into Connell's crash had still not been made public. According to an NTSB spokesperson, it was "still being reviewed." That's scant comfort to Connell's family, who just want some sense of closure, whatever the outcome.

Still, "In my mind and my heart," says Shannon Connell, "I am convinced he was murdered."

We may never know the truth about Connell's last flight, but contracts between Connell's company, GovTech, and Ken Blackwell's administration establish a credible scenario for electoral fraud and place Connell at the scene of the alleged crime.

Among other things, the contracts contradict Connell's sworn testimony that SMARTech, in Chattanooga, merely acted as a backup site for election data.

The contracts, signed in March 2004, show that SMARTech was specifically tasked with creating a "mirror site" to manage election night results. "What this means is that Connell's company was on both sides of the mirror," explains Stephen Spoonamore. "And that the votes of the people of Ohio were in the control of a fiercely partisan IT company (SMARTech) and operating out of another state."

Clouding matters further is the persistent specter of paranoid conspiracy that has enveloped the case from the beginning. In September 2009, an anonymous letter was sent to the FBI in Ohio and five other addressees, including Heather Connell. "Enclosed is a document that is not meant to exist," begins the anonymous writer. Included is what purports to be an "after action report" by a black ops agent. All names have been redacted, but the report provides a detailed time log of actions taken to install an AMD (microprocessor) in the engine of Connell's plane at College Park Airfield in D.C. the night before he made his fatal last flight. Connell himself is not mentioned by name. Just the registration number of his plane, NP299N, which the agent confirms he had been sent to "neutralize." The letter accompanying the report is headed MICHAEL CONNELL, HOMICIDE. It ends with the words: "Connell was not NST (national security threat)."

While skeptics may be tempted to dismiss these documents as the ingenious work of a hoaxer intent on pouring gasoline on the bonfire of conspiracy theories already surrounding Connell, a number of experts from the intelligence community who have seen the document believe it to be genuine. In early November, the NTSB finally released its factual report into Connell's crash. The report concludes that tests carried out on the plane's engine, flight control, and autopilot systems revealed "no anomalies that would have precluded normal operation."

A spokeswoman for the NTSB confirmed that the organization had received a copy of the anonymous letter, but would not say whether its claims were being looked into. "We're investigating the accident," she says, "not any possible criminal activity." She adds that the NTSB forwarded the letter to the FBI in

Cleveland. When asked to confirm this, Scott Wilson at the FBI's Cleveland bureau, says, "The only thing I can say is . . . I can't say anything."

Ultimately, only a full criminal investigation can determine the truth about Ohio '04 and the death of Michael Connell. Robert Kennedy Jr., who sought Connell's cooperation during an investigation into the election, believes the current administration should pursue the matter. "I think this is more serious than Watergate," he says. "Watergate was essentially about winning the battle for public opinion. That's why the break-in took place—to gather strategic information about Democratic strategy and dirt. But the electoral process remained intact. The Ohio vote undermines the very foundation stone of American democracy. There should be an official investigation. Otherwise this becomes a blueprint for how to steal an election from here to eternity."

That may not be enough for Connell's widow. When I first spoke to her on the phone, Heather Connell was adamant that her husband's plane crash had been an accident, God's will. But she is no longer so sure. "This is a messed-up case of whether Karl Rove threatened my husband or not," she says. I ask her directly if she now believes her husband could have been murdered. She takes a deep drag of her cigarette and, choking back tears, says: "I don't know. I don't know."

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