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Rove's Brain and media manipulation

I just saw a horror movie – “Bush’s Brain” – the new documentary based on a book with the same name by journalists James Moore and Wayne Slater. The book’s subtitle is “How Karl Rove Made George W. Bush Presidential.” I’ll spare you the grim details. What matters most now is that Rove’s long record of shady and vicious media operations is not just in the past.

Rove is more than a master manipulator of the news media. He’s a stealthy smear artist who does whatever he can get away with. And Rove has gotten away with plenty. That’s how George W. Bush became governor of Texas ... and president of the United States. What remains to be seen is whether Rove’s techniques will again prove successful when this country votes on Nov. 2.

For all his deft skullduggery, Rove is smart enough to always remember that you can’t beat something with nothing. It’s not enough to tar the opponent with accusations and innuendos. It’s also necessary to tout Rove’s candidate as a guy just this side of the angels. And so, the Bush campaign is combining out-of-sight stilettos and out-front verbal attacks with elaborate poses of ultimate Goodness.

Yes, lots of campaigns routinely trash the foe – and puff up the fair-haired boy or girl as the wondrous alternative to disaster. But the extremism of the Bush administration is comprehensive. The way it governs is the way it campaigns. A regime that goes all-out to lie and deceive while dragging the country into war can hardly be expected to hang back from similar endeavors when its hold on the presidency is at stake.

More than anything else, the most important added advantage that Karl Rove has this time around is incumbency. He was working for challengers when, as “Bush’s Brain” sketches out, he engaged in dirty tricks against two governors running for re-election in Texas. And he didn’t have access to the levers of White House power when his man defeated Al Gore in 2000. Now, Rove’s capacity to make some huge things happen (with a prudent degree or two of separation) is greatly enhanced.

The Swift Boat uproar that erupted in mid-August was vintage Rove. He didn’t sign the checks for the scurrilous anti-Kerry commercials, yet much of the financing and

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advising for those ads came from Republicans who've had a close working relationship with Rove.

Now, it's a safe bet that the two months between the end of the 2004 Republican National Convention and Election Day will be the nastiest stretch drive in modern presidential politics. Campaigns have always strived to win, but the top strategist behind the Bush-Cheney ticket is something else. Just ask some Texas politicians – like former Gov. Mark White and former Gov. Ann Richards. Or ask former Sen. Max Cleland.

The evidence is strong that Rove bugged his own office at a key moment in the 1986 gubernatorial campaign and then spun the Texas media to point the finger at Gov. White. Eight years later, Gov. Richards found herself subjected to below-the-radar whisper campaigns. The Rove-style line of attack was much more flagrant in 2002 when the successful GOP candidate in Georgia ran TV commercials depicting the wheelchair-bound Vietnam veteran Cleland as a soul-mate of Osama bin Laden.

A couple of decades ago, Lee Atwater was a mentor to Karl Rove. And it could not have escaped Rove's attention that Atwater helped to craft the Willie Horton commercial – utilizing lies about Michael Dukakis' record as governor of Massachusetts, appealing to racism and providing a boost to victory for George H.W. Bush in the 1988 presidential election.

Since then, it has become clear that Rove believes in nothing more than winning. But the news media should adhere to a different set of ethics.

It's not enough to provide stenographic services for candidates and campaign strategists. Journalism is supposed to dig for truth and bring it to light. But in the real world, activists need to demand that mainstream media outlets stop evading and start exposing deception in real time.

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