

Neil Bush of Saudi Arabia

by *Bill Berkowitz*

During recent visit, President's brother describes the country as a 'kind of tribal democracy'

In late February, only a few days after Saudi Arabia beheaded four Sri Lankan robbers and then left their headless bodies on public display in the capital of Riyadh, Neil Bush, for the fourth time in the past six years, showed up for the country's Jeddah Economic Forum. The Guardian reported that Human Rights Watch "said the four men had no lawyers during their trial and sentencing, and were denied other basic legal rights." In an interview with Arab News, the Saudi English language paper, Bush described the country as "a kind of tribal democracy."

Neil Bush Neil Mallon Bush, the son of President George H. W. Bush and the brother of President George W. Bush, attended the forum to renew old family friendships and to drum up a little business for his educational software company. "The Jeddah Economic Forum has been very productive," Bush told Arab News. "I have been to this conference four times since 2002. I have seen it develop from the very beginning. There was less participation in the past, now there is more international participation."

These days, Neil Bush is the chairman and CEO of Ignite Learning, a company devoted to developing technology-assisted curriculum. Ignite calls it COW: "Curriculum on Wheels." In an interview with Arab News' Siraj Wahab, Bush talked enthusiastically about his company's mission: "We are building a model in the United States for developing curriculum that is engaging to grade-school kids, and our model is to deploy this engaging content through a device. So it is easy for any teacher to use our device through projectors and speakers. The curriculum is loaded on the device. We use animation and video and those kinds of things to light up learning in classrooms for kids. It helps teachers connect with their kids. We are planning to develop an Arabic version of that model."

According to Wikipedia, Ignite was founded in 1999 and has "raised \$23 million from U.S. investors, including his parents... as well as businessmen from Taiwan , Japan , Kuwait , the British Virgin Islands and the United Arab Emirates , according to documents filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Russian billionaire expatriate Boris Berezovsky (and Berezovsky's partner Badri Patarkatsishvili), Kuwaiti company head Mohammed Al Saddah, and Chinese computer executive Winston Wong are documented investors."

The blog Media Mindfulness recently looked into a COW lesson relating to habeus corpus and found that "the lesson [was] in dire need of some media literacy. It's curious how it repeatedly justifies the suspension of the law":

If you go to Ignite Learning's Web site and click on the "easy-to-use" button, what you see is a completely closed system. I think "cow" is an appropriate name. Make your students go "Moo"!

Making education more like television, which this system seems to emulate, is not the answer. It would appear that in the case of COW the teacher is merely a manager of the curriculum, not an engaged, free thinking agent. There is something terribly frightening about making kids watch lessons in TV-like packages and then train them to repeat what they see. My hope is that kids are savvy and smart enough to see through this crap and reject it outright. I hate to say this but this is one situation when truancy might be the best educational strategy.

The Ignite! video makes clear the enervating, rote approach to learning taken by the Bush family. While this may not be an advance in actual education, it does serve to enrich Neil Bush and commodify teachers. In concept it is much like Channel One, whereby Chris Whittle enriched himself forcing millions of primary school students to watch repackaged TV News sandwiched between corporate advertising.

Responding to a question from the Arab News reporter about the "people who tell him they are not happy with his brother's foreign policy," Bush said: "Don't forget, I am the son of a president who I deeply respect and admire and who is admired a lot in this region. I think my dad has demonstrated in his policy how sensitive he is to culture, how bringing people together and how dialogue and conversation can lead to peace... And even when there is aggression you know you can deal with it in a way that is wise and judicious."

As to the sitting president, Bush said that he thought "people need to be fair about the position my brother is in. My brother is president at a time in history that we have never seen before as Americans. Our country was attacked viciously, and I think everybody in the world recognizes that. The reaction he has had to it in part reflects the deep hurt of the tragedy that struck us on Sept. 11, 2001. He is doing what he thinks is right."

Bush also pointed out that he tries to not get into his brother's political business. "I have a personal policy similar to my dad's policy and that is I don't discuss politics with my brother," Bush said. "He is an elected president. He never appointed me to be his secretary of state. I love my brother as a brother. He has two children; I have six now, so we talk about life in general. We have a lot in common. But he doesn't talk about my business and I don't talk about his. When he retires we will have plenty of good chats."

If you didn't know Neil Bush's back-story, the Arab News interview would be of little help. A few key points: As a member of the board of directors, Bush was involved in the bilking of Silverado Savings and Loan during the 1980s savings and loan crisis; in July 1999, Bush made at least \$798,000 on three stock trades in a single day of the Taunton, Massachusetts-based Kopin Corporation, a company where he had been employed as a consultant; in 2002, Bush signed a consulting contract that paid \$2 million dollars in stock over five years to work for Grace Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp., a firm backed by Jiang Mianheng, the son of former Chinese President Jiang Zemin, plus \$10,000 for every board meeting he attends; in 2005, Bush accompanied the Rev. Sun Myung Moon (another family patron) on part of his world tour promoting Moon's idea for a Universal Peace Federation.

Then there were the sex romps: Revelations garnered from Bush's divorce deposition became fodder for gossipers across the country when he admitted to sexual encounters with high-priced escorts in Thailand and

Hong Kong, who mysteriously appeared at the doors of his hotel rooms.

The Saudi connection

Neil Bush, like others in the Bush Family, has cultivated a very close relationship with the Saudi Royal Family. As Kevin Phillips wrote in his book "American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush" (2004): "Also shaping Middle Eastern relations was the fact that the [Bush] family had cemented unique business and personal ties to the royal families of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the emirates. After he left the White House in 1993, George H. W. Bush made a number of visits. His relationships with the Saudis, in particular, remained so close that the Saudi ambassador in Washington, Prince Bandar, and his wife considered the Bushes 'almost family.'"

As a member of the Carlyle Group's Asian Advisory Board, the senior Bush "made highly compensated speeches and trips on its behalf -- most frequently to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf -- and helped the group procure well-heeled investors." According to Phillips, "Twelve rich Saudi individuals and families signed up (including the bin Laden family prior to 9/11), as well as the investment offices of Kuwait and Abu Dhabi."

About the time of Neil Bush's first visit to the Jeddah Economic Forum in February 2002 the Washington Post reported that "Saudis close to Prince Sultan, the Saudi defense minister, were encouraged to put money into Carlyle as a favor to the elder Bush." According to Phillips, "By some accounts, Carlyle acted as a gatekeeper for would-be U.S. investors in Saudi Arabia."

In February 2006 the Associated Press reported that donors to President George H. W. Bush's presidential library located at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, included a sheik from the United Arab Emirates, who contributed at least \$1 million, the state of Kuwait, the Bandar bin Sultan family, the Sultanate of Oman, and King Hassan II of Morocco.

In 2001, after George W. Bush took the White House, he appointed Texas lawyer Robert Jordan as the U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Phillips noted that Jordan "defended" Bush "in the 1990 probe of possible insider trading in the sale of his Harken [Energy] stock, as well as a partner in Baker and Botts, the attorneys for the Carlyle Group."

Phillips observed that in January 2002, Neil Bush "made his fourth trip to the Middle East since" George W. had become president: "Besides meeting with members of the Saudi royal family, he pursued joint ventures with computer software firms in Dubai and contracts with the United Arab Emirates' Ministry of Education."

Over time, Neil Bush has become a big Saudi booster. Asked by Arab News' Siraj Wahab about the so-called "clash of civilizations," Bush said that he "get[s] frustrated when I talk to my American friends about the region in general and particularly about Saudi Arabia. There is this common misperception of the Arab people, of the Muslim faith, about the relationship with Saudi Arabia. I think there needs to be leadership on both sides to help bridge the gap of misunderstanding. A lot of my American friends, a lot of Americans in general, have common misunderstandings and the basic myths that they have in their minds about this region."

Bush explained how he describes the situation in Saudi Arabia to folks back home: "I can explain it very well, but people won't believe me unless and until they come and see it for themselves. For example, I am bringing a delegation today that talks of water-desalination technology -- very amazing technology. They have never been to Saudi Arabia. Obviously they can't help but be impressed by the hospitality and the warmth of the reception and the response of the people that they met regarding their project. They just loved this place. The terrain is interesting to them. You know, romantic and kind of exciting. So there is a lot to be said about coming here and seeing it for yourself."

Bush said it is important to gain "a more balanced perspective" on Saudi Arabia: "If I go by the images of Saudi Arabia portrayed in movies, that of gun-toting mullahs, then I think I will have a very different impression of Saudi Arabia than the one that is balanced and based on reason and facts."

Finally, Bush pointed out that Saudi Arabia is "a kind of tribal democracy that people don't talk about very much," he said. "So it hurts me quite a bit and causes me anguish over the ignorance outside about Saudi Arabia."

Neil Bush of Saudi Arabia by Bill_Berkowitz