

The fuel for Fahrenheit 9/11

By Torcuil Creighton
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Thanks to the First Amendment of the United States constitution, some robust laws that defend writers against libel and principles that enshrine freedom of expression and an open system of government, respected American journalist Craig Unger has been able to write an explosive book about President George Bush and his links to the Saudi royal family.

It's called House Of Bush House Of Saud and in it Unger details the connections between a leading member of the Saudi royal family and the fundamentalist terrorist groups determined to destroy the US. It was this book that formed the backbone of Michael Moore's much-hyped documentary Fahrenheit 9/11.

The Jeddah-based Saudi billionaire, Khalid bin Mahfouz, has been publicly linked to funding received by Osama bin Laden in America before but the new dimension to House Of Bush House Of Saud is that Unger also peels away the business links between the Texas oil circle of the Bush family and the families of Bin Mahfouz and other rich Saudis.

In Britain, where Saudis prefer to take their libel actions to court, Unger has had to be more circumspect than in his homeland. His first publisher, Random House, refused to take the risk with the book and Amazon, the internet bookseller, declined to sell it online from its UK website. There have been forced amendments too, taken on with some fanfare by Gibson Square Publishing. But the book, he assures me, is 95% there. And it is there in astonishing and explosive detail.

Unger's book details the \$1.4 billion that the Bush family circle has made out of the Saudi Royal connection in a 30-year relationship, how these close business and personal links may have clouded the US war on terror and how the Saudi investment in the Texan political dynasty was repaid in spades in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

In the days after the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, when US air traffic was tightly restricted, 140 Saudis, many immediate relatives of Osama bin Laden, were permitted to leave the country without being questioned by US intelligence. From locations around the US, the Saudis were collected and flown across the Atlantic to

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London, Europe and beyond.

“The disturbing thing is that two dozen members of the bin Laden family were shepherded out of the country with White House approval,” says Unger. “They should have been detained as material witnesses. This is not to suggest that they were guilty of anything but in the most basic criminal investigation you’d want to question the innocent family members of the accused too. Instead they were whisked away.”

In Britain, Unger’s accusations would be taken very seriously, but in America the material is either wilfully ignored by the media or dismissed as conspiracy theory.

It’s hard to dismiss Unger as a conspiracy theorist. He is a soberly dressed, adroit, American liberal journalist with years of reporting and editing experience. His book is meticulously researched, assiduously foot-noted, impeccably sourced and is not just a revealing account of the Bush White House, it is also an exposé of the failure of American journalism after 9/11.

That is a theme Unger constantly touches on as he talks about his battle with the right-wing media. “There are an enormous number of foreign sources in the book. It drives me crazy how inept American journalism is.”

For a European, it is hard to fathom just how self-censored the US media is. Most Americans remain blissfully unaware of what is going on in the war on terror. Last October, for instance, a viewers survey for Fox News, the Rupert Murdoch-owned cheerleader for the Republican administration, found that 33% of Americans thought the US had found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq when it had not. Moreover, 67% thought that Saddam Hussein had ties with al-Qaeda.

“The facts are outside the comfort zone of the right-wing US press,” says Unger. “The flights were corroborated by the 9/11 commission but they are still dismissed by mainstream American media. While the 9/11 Commission corroborates my material, it does not get to the heart of what happened.”

In the US, writing about things like the right-wing Project For A New American Century will hurt the career of a journalist but, as numerous hits on the Sunday Herald website demonstrates, there is a huge hunger among US citizens for information on what is being done in their name.

It is in the oldest form of communication, the book, and in the newest, the internet, that the truth about American politics has been written in the past three years. Documentary film has helped too. Michael Moore took the core of Unger’s book and turned it into a hard-hitting propaganda film which the comedian and commentator claims will swing the November election away from Bush.

“A book sells 200,000 copies and is a huge success but in a nation of 300 million people it

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doesn't really change the national conversation," Unger acknowledges. "Moore has introduced it into the national consciousness in a way the best book marketing could not do. You need someone like Moore to catapult this into the public arena but at the same time in a film he can't be as nuanced as a book is."

And the book is extraordinary in recording the detail of the relationship between the Texas oil family and the Arabian princes who wooed their way into the heart of American politics. In the course of the 30-year relationship, which has blossomed into personal friendship between the Bush family and many members of the Saudi household, the two Bush presidents and their extended clan of friends and business associates have made \$1.4 billion of trade with the Saudis.

The relationship began in the 1970s, when the oil-rich House of Saud began courting American politicians in a bid for military protection, influence, and investment opportunity. By investing in the Bush family, the Saudis gained direct access to presidents Reagan, George HW Bush, and George W Bush. To trace the amazing weave of Saud-Bush connections, Unger interviewed three former directors of the CIA, top Saudi and Israeli intelligence officials, and more than 100 other sources. This is a man who is sure of his facts.

The problem, Unger says, is that after 30 years of cronyism and money making Bush was too close to the House of Saud to ask the tough questions. "I don't think Bush sees the difference between family business and the interests of the nation."

As for the future, Unger fears the worst of both worlds, with Bush having to harden his attitude to Saudi sponsorship of terrorism and the Saudi leaders turning away from America because no Arab leader can be seen as pro-American. "The White House don't see Iraq as a failure, they see it as a success, which is scary," says Unger.

"Now we have other threats emerging, the ascendancy of China and its energy needs and the succession in the House of Saud to more fundamentalist princes. If America loses access to the Saudi oilfields you have to ask: what will Bush do?"

According to Unger, all this plays into the hands of America's nemesis. "Bin Laden has had great success since 9/11. He's done far better than the administration would admit. He demanded the removal of US troops from Saudi Arabia and that's been done. He called for a Holy War and the US delivered it to him in Iraq and set the stage for bigger things."

And from the view of bin Laden the tactics that succeeded in destroying a superpower in Afghanistan can also succeed in the Middle East. Effectively the Soviet Union was lured into a land war with Muslim fundamentalists which was futile, expensive and went on forever. "Now," says Unger, "we are the Soviet Union."

House Of Bush House Of Saud by Craig Unger is out now (Gibson Square Publishing,