

bigleaguepolitics.com

A conservative political site owned by a political consultant that has promoted false claims and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, including about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ownership and Financing

Big League Politics is owned by Mustard Seed Media, a privately held company based in Raleigh, North Carolina, according to reporting by The Daily Beast. Mustard Seed is operated by Reilly O’Neal, a Republican political consultant who previously worked for Alabama U.S. Senate candidate Roy Moore in 2017.

O’Neal’s consulting firm, Tidewater Strategies, received payments from several Republican campaigns in the 2018 election cycle, including Moore (\$202,361), Mississippi U.S. Senate candidate Chris McDaniel (\$127,597), and Florida congressional candidate Carlos Reyes (\$8,271), according to Federal Election Commission records. Through Tidewater, O’Neal was the campaign manager for 2014 North Carolina U.S. Senate candidate Greg Brannon.

Tidewater Strategies has also worked for Republican campaigns in the 2020 election cycle. As of May 2020, it had received payments from Jeff Moore, a candidate in the 2019 special election in North Carolina’s 3rd Congressional District (\$118,259), Florida congressional candidate Laura Loomer (\$30,241), and Kansas U.S. Senate candidate Kris Kobach (\$27,250).

O’Neal also runs a political action committee named the Principled Leadership Project, which ran ads called “Stop the Violent Left” in support of Republican candidate Karen Handel in the 2017 special election in Georgia’s 6th Congressional District. According to an August 2018 Daily Beast article, two other O’Neal companies — email vendor Rightside Lists and fundraising firm Capital Square Funding Group — were paid more than \$100,000 by the Arizona Republican Kelli Ward’s Senate campaign.



Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic standards of credibility and transparency.

Score: 12.5/100

- ✗ Does not repeatedly publish false content (22points)
- ✗ Gathers and presents information responsibly (18)
- ✗ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors (12.5)
- ✗ Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly (12.5)
- ✗ Avoids deceptive headlines (10)
- ✗ Website discloses ownership and financing (7.5)
- ✓ Clearly labels advertising (7.5)
- ✗ Reveals who’s in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest (5)
- ✓ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information (5)

Criteria are listed in order of importance.

[More information.](#)

The site runs advertisements.

Content

The site's About page states that "Big League Politics is a fast-paced news site led by a team of top-level investigative reporters, filmmakers, and citizen journalists all over the country. We challenge powerful politicians in both the Republican and Democratic Parties. We are not conservative. We are not liberal. We are road warriors fighting the good fight for journalism."

The site's focus is on U.S. politics. Its main sections include Guns, The Swamp, National Security, and Culture, with subsections including Deplorables and Snowflakes, which contain stories that laud conservative figures and criticize progressive causes and groups.

Typical headlines on the site have included "The Chinese Communist Party is Scared of American Populism," "Joe Biden Planning Sham Imitation Presidential Briefings," and "Georgia Democrat Who Endorses Trump Abandons Plans to Resign, Will Defy Bullying of the Left."

Credibility

Big League Politics has published numerous false claims in its articles, including unsubstantiated conspiracy theories about Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, a January 2020 article titled "HMM: Coronavirus Patent is Owned by Vaccine-Production Institute Funded by Bill Gates," stated that "The Pirbright Institute, which has been funded by globalist oligarch and vaccine pusher Bill Gates, has a patent on the books for coronavirus."

The patent cited by Big League Politics is not related to the COVID-19 virus. It is true that the U.K.-based Pirbright Institute has accepted funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and holds a patent on a strain of coronavirus, but that strain only affects chickens, not humans. "Pirbright does not currently

work with human coronaviruses,” the institute said in a January 2020 post on its website, responding to the patent claims.

In another January 2020 article, titled “ZeroHedge BANNED From Twitter After Posting Findings of ‘HIV’ Insertions in Coronavirus, Bioweapon Possibility,” the site promoted the false claim that the COVID-19 virus was engineered, based on a story published by ZeroHedge.com, a site NewsGuard found to have repeatedly published false claims. “Big Tech entities are desperately trying to suppress news that the Chinese coronavirus has ‘HIV’ insertions which indicate it is a potential bioweapon...The Zerohedge report noted that researchers from India came to the conclusion about the virus after studying its genome.”

This claim originated with a study posted on the website BioRxiv.org, which publishes scientific studies before they have undergone peer review. According to a February 2020 article on the fact-checking website HealthFeedback.org, the study’s finding that there is a similarity between the COVID-19 virus and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) “was detected using extremely short protein sequences, a practice that often gives rise to false positive results,” noting that those same sequences are found in many other organisms.

The authors of the study withdrew it from BioRxiv.org just two days after it was published, which is not mentioned in the Big League Politics article.

There is also no evidence that the COVID-19 virus “is a potential bioweapon,” as the article claimed. A March 2020 study published in the journal Nature Medicine concluded that the virus “is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus.” An earlier study, published in February 2020 in the journal Nature, found that the COVID-19 virus is “96% percent identical at the whole-genome level to a bat coronavirus.” In April 2020, the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence said in a statement that it “concurs with the wide scientific consensus that the COVID-19 virus was not manmade or genetically modified.”

The website also promoted a misleading claim about a photo taken at an April 2020 protest in Denver against Colorado's stay-at-home order. The April 2020 article, headlined "Fake News Journo Who Photographed First Responders Blocking Traffic Has History of Staging Medical Photo-Ops," claimed that photos, first published by Reuters, showing two people dressed in scrubs standing in front of anti-stay-at-home protester's cars, may have been staged. "Liberals are calling these individuals heroic for their anti-constitutional demonstration, but it may have been a complete hoax as the journalist who took the pictures is known to stage photo ops as part of her job," the article stated.

According to the article, the "photo op is just the latest trick the establishment is using to put down the mounting resistance to coronavirus hysteria."

Big League Politics' only backup for this claim was an October 2018 Facebook post in which Alyson McClaran, the freelance photographer who took the 2020 photo, asked for "a nurse or someone who has the uniform and a stethoscope to help for (Michigan State University] Denver's online publication." That post does not appear to have any connection with the April 2020 photo — having been posted to Facebook 18 months earlier — and BigLeaguePolitics.com provides no evidence to support the claim that the protest photo was staged.

When BuzzFeed News asked McClaran if she staged the protest, she responded, "Absolutely, I did not." In a separate interview with Time magazine, McClaran said she did not confirm that the counter-protesters were actually health care workers. "I don't have any information on that unfortunately, but I never got the feeling that they weren't," she said. "I believe they were health care workers." In an April 2020 article, Denver-based alternative weekly Westword identified one of the two photographed people dressed in scrubs as "Jo," a physician assistant.

In June 2018, the site published a story headlined “UPDATED: Child’s Skull Found At Alleged Sex-Trafficking Bunker Area In Tucson.” The article was based on a claim made by Veterans on Patrol, a local advocacy group for homeless veterans, that had spread on social media.

However, the area in question was investigated by Tucson police, who determined it was not a “sex-trafficking bunker,” but likely was a homeless encampment. The group also claimed that a skull was located near the area, but according to Pima County Chief Medical Examiner Gregory Hess, the skull had actually been located more than 20 miles from Tucson, in Marana, Arizona. Hess also clarified that the skull was that of an adult, not a child.

The falsehoods in the headline were debunked by fact-checking site Snopes one day after Big League Politics published its story. Nevertheless, Big League Politics kept its story up for months, until at least November 2018, before it deleted the text. It did append an “update” acknowledging that the medical examiner had determined the skull was that of an adult, but the article went on to challenge his determination, quoting a member of the veterans group who, without evidence, insisted his group had found the remains of a child.

In March 2018, the site inaccurately reported that David Hogg, one of the survivors of the February 14, 2018, school massacre in Parkland, Florida, and an outspoken advocate for gun control, was not actually in school the day of the shooting. In the article, “SHOCK: David Hogg Changes Story, Wasn’t At School When Cruz Opened Fire,” Big League Politics seized on a quote from Hogg in an interview with CBS News, in which he said, “On the day of the shooting, I got my camera and got on my bike and rode as fast as I could three miles from my house to the school....” The site claimed this quote showed that Hogg was not actually in the school during the shooting, despite widespread

reporting and video footage, which emerged before Big League Politics posted its article, that showed that he was there.

FactCheck.org and several news outlets disproved the claim, reporting that Hogg had been at school during the shooting, went home later, and then returned around 6 P.M. The bike ride Hogg mentioned to CBS News referred to his return to school grounds later that evening. One outlet that had also used this interview to challenge Hogg's account, RedState.com, later corrected its claims and apologized for the error. As of May 2020, Big League Politics had not corrected or updated its story.

Big League Politics has also published favorable coverage of Republican politicians whose campaigns have paid site owner Reilly O'Neal's consulting firm without disclosing that relationship. For example, in a March 2020 story headlined "America First Patriot Kris Kobach Believes Democrats are Using the Wuhan Virus Crisis to Push Socialism," the site said of the Kansas U.S. Senate candidate, "The former Kansas Secretary of State is a certified immigration patriot and understands the value of limited government. He's the only choice for America First patriots who believe in constitutional governance." As of May 2020, Tidewater Strategies had been paid \$27,250 by Kobach's Senate campaign.

Similarly, a February 2020 article titled "NO FLUKE: Congressional Candidate Laura Loomer Outraises Incumbent Democrat for 2nd Straight Quarter," said Loomer, a candidate for Congress from Florida, "is raking in big league cash as she attempts to be a true voice for the grassroots in the House of Representatives." As of May 2020, Tidewater Strategies had been paid \$30,241 by Loomer's campaign.

Because Big League Politics has repeatedly published articles and headlines with false and unsubstantiated information, and its stories have promoted conservative candidates that have paid the site's owner for consulting work without disclosure on the

site, NewsGuard has determined that the site has repeatedly published false content, fails to gather and present information responsibly, and does not avoid deceptive headlines.

The site does not post a policy explaining how it corrects errors, though its About page states, "All stories on Big League Politics are factually accurate." NewsGuard found four corrections, noted in italicized notes at the end of articles, published between April 2018 and April 2019. However, because the site has left numerous other articles that include false claims uncorrected, NewsGuard has determined the site does not regularly correct errors.

A notice on the bottom of the site's articles appears to refer to Big League Politics as conservative. This notice states, "Bypass Tech Censorship! Facebook, Twitter and Google are actively restricting conservative content through biased algorithms. Silicon Valley doesn't want you to read our articles. Bypass the censorship, sign up for our newsletter now!"

For example, an April 2020 article about Stacey Abrams, the 2018 Democratic nominee in Georgia gubernatorial election, was headlined "MUST WATCH VIDEO: Socialist Stacey Abrams Unveils Her Plan to Remake Congress at 2014 Conference." The article called Abrams a "radical leftist" for her view on redistricting.

"In this plan, Abrams and her colleagues will likely incorporate subversive actions that facilitate mass migration in order to pad the electorate," the article. "For that reason, President Trump must lay down the hammer on immigration and pass a full-blown moratorium so that Democrats don't have an easy way to electoral dominance in the country."

In another April 2020 article, titled "Shall Not Be Infringed: FBI Reports that Record Numbers of Americans Bought Firearms in March," stated, "In a time when many cities and state government are conducting anarcho-tyrannical social experiments by

letting out inmates with established criminal records, Americans are getting strapped. Police cannot be relied upon, so citizens have to take matters into their hands when it comes to providing their own defense.”

Despite Big League Politics’ disclosure that it encourages its writers to “have a voice,” because the site claims not to have a conservative orientation on its About page, yet includes opinionated statements and headlines favoring conservative policies in articles labeled as “news,” NewsGuard has determined that the site does not handle the difference between news and opinion responsibly.

Big League Politics did not respond to two emails that included questions on the site’s history of publishing false claims, its approach to corrections, lack of separation between news and opinion, and the lack of disclosure about O’Neal’s financial relationships with candidates covered on the site. Two phone calls to O’Neal in May 2020, as well as a message sent through the site’s contact form in November 2018, did not draw a response.

Transparency

Big League Politics does not disclose its ownership by Mustard Seed Media. It also does not disclose Mustard Seed Media owner Reilly O’Neal’s work for Republican campaigns in articles mentioning those candidates.

Articles on the site generally name the author and link to a page containing their Twitter handle and a brief biography. The site’s Contact Us page includes a general contact form.

The site does not identify its editorial leadership. Patrick Howley is named as the site’s editor-in-chief on his author page, but Howley no longer works for Big League Politics, according to a July 2019 article in Washingtonian magazine. Despite his departure, Howley’s email address is still listed on the site’s Submit A Tip page, as of May 2020.

Big League Politics did not respond to two emails that included questions about the site's lack of information about ownership and editors. Two phone calls to O'Neal in May 2020, as well as a message sent through the site's contact form in November 2018, did not draw a response.

Advertisements on the site are distinguishable from editorial content.

History

Big League Politics was launched in early 2017, and the site was acquired by Mustard Seed Media in early 2018. According to The Daily Beast, Mustard Seed Media converted the official Twitter account of Roy Moore's Alabama Senate campaign into the Twitter account for Big League Politics.

In an interview with political and culture site Observer.com in April 2018, Howley said that Big League Politics was "the main site that put Seth Rich into the mainstream." He was referring to the conspiracy theory that Rich, a Democratic National Committee staffer who was shot and killed in July 2016 in what Washington police believe was a robbery attempt, was actually assassinated for leaking DNC emails. Multiple fact-checking organizations, including PolitiFact, Snopes, and Factcheck.org, have found the Seth Rich theories to be false.

In February 2019, Big League Politics was the first media organization to report that Virginia Governor Ralph Northam's medical school yearbook page contained a photo of one man dressed in black face and another wearing Ku Klux Klan robes. Northam, a Democrat, confirmed that he was one of the people in the photo, although he did not say which one. One day later, however, he denied that he was in the photo. The reports about the yearbook photo prompted widespread calls for Northam's resignation, including from top Democrats in Virginia and nationwide. Northam did not resign.

Howley told NPR that he published the photo after receiving a tip from a “concerned citizen” and said that Northam was “clearly one of the two people in that photo.” However, Howley offered no additional evidence to back up his assertion.

A May 2019 investigation, conducted by a law firm hired by Eastern Virginia Medical School, Northam’s alma mater, concluded that it could not determine whether Northam was in the photograph or if the photo was erroneously placed on a page that included Northam’s name.

Two days after the site broke the yearbook story, Big League Politics published an article reporting that a woman who had a mutual friend with Virginia Lieutenant Governor Justin Fairfax had made sexual assault allegations against Fairfax, who would become governor if Northam were to resign. Fairfax’s office called the report “defamatory and false” and threatened legal action against the site. Fairfax’s statement also said that The Washington Post had investigated the claims months earlier and had chosen not to report on them.

The Washington Post acknowledged in an article on its site that it had investigated the claims. The Post said that Fairfax and the woman presented different versions of the story, and it “could not find anyone who could corroborate either version.” The Post also said that it found no similar allegations against Fairfax. “Without that, or the ability to corroborate the woman’s account — in part because she had not told anyone what happened — The Washington Post did not run a story,” The Washington Post article stated.

Correction: An earlier version of this Nutrition Label misspelled the last name of 2014 North Carolina Senate candidate Greg Brannon.

Editor’s Note: This Nutrition Label was updated on May 7, 2020, with new examples of the site’s content. It was previously updated on Feb. 25, 2020.

Edited by: [Yemile Bucay](#), [Eric Efron](#)

Send feedback to NewsGuard: [Click Here](#)

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