

Florida presidential recount: Bush campaign makes appeal to military and extreme right

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Less than 24 hours after a Florida Supreme Court decision temporarily halted plans by the Republican-controlled state government to declare George W. Bush the winner of the presidential election, the Bush campaign returned to the attack in a press conference Saturday afternoon. Spokesmen for the Texas governor combined a denunciation of the manual recount in three south Florida counties with the allegation that the Gore campaign and the Florida Democratic Party were seeking to exclude absentee ballots cast by military personnel from the statewide tally.

Both the tone and the content of the statements by Bush spokeswoman Karen Hughes and Montana Governor Marc Racicot, a Bush confidant, were extraordinary, even by the debased standards of contemporary American politics.

Hughes declared, "We are concerned that a targeted effort by the Democratic Party sought to throw out as many as a third of the overseas absentee ballots received since Election Day. No one who aspires to commander in chief should seek to unfairly deny the votes of the men and women he would seek to command."

Racicot came close to inciting insubordination in the military, declaring, "Last night we learned how far the vice president's campaign will go to win this election. And I am very sorry to say but the vice president's lawyers have gone to war, in my judgment, against the men and women who serve in our armed forces."

The Bush campaign also released a statement from retired General Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of US forces in the Persian Gulf War and a fervent Bush supporter, regretting that military personnel were finding that "because of some technicality out of their control they are denied the right to vote for the president of the United States, who will be their commander in chief."

The Bush campaign has shown no compunction about using technicalities to exclude tens of thousands of potentially valid votes which punch-card machines failed to read. In fact, Bush's entire claim to victory rests on a technicality: the claim by Republican Secretary of State Katherine Harris that state law bars including recount totals

which are submitted later than Tuesday, November 14.

The Republicans sought to waive just such a deadline for absentee ballots, which must be postmarked by Election Day according to state law. The postmark requirement is not merely a technicality, however, since it is the only indication that the ballot was actually sent from overseas.

The political significance of the military ballots goes well beyond the relatively small number of votes, which is unlikely to affect the outcome in Florida. Raising the issue is, on the part of the Bush campaign, a clear attempt to foment military opposition to the Democrats and to sound out sections of the military brass on their attitude toward a possible election stalemate.

It is worth recalling that soon after the Clinton-Gore administration took office, Republican Senator Jesse Helms warned the new president not to come to military bases in his home state of North Carolina because he was so unpopular that he would be in physical danger. During the 2000 campaign there was an unprecedented mobilization of retired military brass behind the Bush-Cheney campaign, including some top officers who had left active service only days before issuing their endorsement of the Republican ticket

The Republican attack on the manual recount in three south Florida counties also had a definite political audience in mind. The Bush campaign has taken up the claim, up to now limited to extreme right circles, that the manual recount is a crude exercise in vote-stealing by the Gore campaign.

The factual substance of the claims about the manual recount can be disposed of briefly. The Republicans have taken a handful of incidents, largely innocuous or deliberately distorted, and sought to manufacture a case that large-scale vote fraud is being carried out in Palm Beach and Broward counties. (Miami-Dade does not begin its recount until Monday morning, at which point fraud charges will undoubtedly be leveled there as well.)

While Hughes and Racicot claimed there was overwhelming evidence of fraud, none of the affidavits collected by the Republican Party have been submitted to

election officials either in the three counties concerned or in the Republican-controlled state government. Thus, their goal in raising the issue is not to expose or prevent real vote-stealing, but to poison public opinion against the recount with unfounded charges, even before any totals are announced.

The method of the Bush campaign is a further elaboration of the Big Lie technique in which they have engaged since the election. Judge Charles Burton, supervisor of the Palm Beach County recount, analyzed one piece of “evidence,” the presence of scotch tape on a half-dozen ballots, in some cases taping the “chad” back over the hole indicating a vote for Bush. Burton explained that all these ballots had been mailed in by absentee voters who had likely punched the wrong number, then sought to rectify their error with scotch tape. Each of these ballots had been reviewed and then counted with the agreement of Republican and Democratic observers.

As an effort to sway the public, the claim of fraud is a futile exercise, since it requires the American people to disbelieve the evidence of their own senses. Television cameras have been trained on the recount since it began, and every person involved is being watched, not only by observers from the Democrats, Republicans and in some cases Greens, but by a nationwide and worldwide audience. As one network commentator noted after the Republican press conference, if there were any substance to the charges, there would be videotape to prove it. None has been presented.

But the Bush campaign is not really targeting the public as a whole. Rather, it is deliberately identifying itself with the most extreme right elements, seeking to feed their frenzy against anyone who opposes the Republican hijacking of the presidency. An entire layer of ultra-right political operatives, right-wing talk show hosts and columnists is seeking to whip up a lynch mob atmosphere over the Florida recount. In their paranoid vision, the Clinton-Gore administration, the most conservative Democratic administration in a century, is a left-wing criminal conspiracy.

The mentality of this layer is expressed in the latest outpouring from syndicated conservative columnist Paul Craig Roberts. Under the headline, “Stop, Thief,” Roberts rants that “more than an election is being stolen. Our country is being stolen.”

According to this deranged analyst, the Democratic Party, one of the two major capitalist parties in America, “is a revolutionary party, committed to overthrowing the ‘hegemonic power’ of traditional American morality, principles, institutions and people.”

Roberts cites the geographical pattern of the vote, with Gore carrying most of his states by relatively narrow

margins, thanks to a heavy turnout in cities and among minority voters. He writes:

“Democrats favor open borders because the millions of Third World immigrants pouring into the United States have no tradition of constitutional government and a rule of law. They come from lands where control over government means enrichment and privilege, and that is what the Democrats offer them.

“Republicans will never get this hardened bloc vote. Blacks voted 90 to 93 percent for Gore, and Hispanics gave Gore between two-thirds and three-fourths of their vote. The longer the borders stay open, the sooner the country will be lost.”

This racist vomit was not written by David Duke or Timothy McVeigh, but by a former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury in the Reagan administration, a regular columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, well-known in conservative circles.

It demonstrates the violent hostility to democracy and the fear of the working class and especially its poorest and most oppressed layers, which lies just underneath the surface of right-wing politics in the United States.

It underscores the fundamental issues of democratic rights that are at stake in the right-wing attempt to rig the Florida election result and install an administration in Washington which will seek to carry out the most sweeping attacks on working people in US history.

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