

The Bush campaign and the rise of the political underworld

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The events which have taken place in the past week in the US presidential election, beginning with Election Night itself, have cast light on a political phenomenon of immense significance: the rise to the pinnacle of the American political system of elements of a gangster character.

These extreme-right elements, who now control the Republican Party, know very well that they cannot take control of the American government by democratic means, because there is widespread popular opposition to their policies. Entrenched in the Republican congressional leadership and the judiciary, they are now seeking to seize control of the presidency through what amounts to a political putsch.

The right-wing cabal includes operatives for the Bush campaign and the Republican Party, steeped in the method of political “dirty tricks”; media spokesmen like the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Post* and an array of talk-radio hosts, for whom no lie is too brazen or absurd; and the network of extreme-right lawyers, like the sinister Theodore Olson [see “Profile of a right-wing conspirator: the case of Theodore Olson”], who played central roles in the Paula Jones lawsuit and the impeachment and trial of President Clinton.

The main weapon of the right-wing is the Big Lie. They operate by the principle laid down by Adolf Hitler: the bigger the lie and the more insistently it is repeated, the more easily it will be believed. And a complacent and cowardly American media treats even the most grotesque and flagrant lies as though they deserved credibility.

Thus Bush recount observer James Baker declares that a machine count is more reliable than a hand count, because machines aren't Democratic or Republican, when everyone knows that the hand count will simply legitimize valid votes that the machine scanners were unable to read.

Thus Bush press spokeswoman Karen Hughes repeats endlessly that Bush has already won Florida once, twice or three times, and no press representative dares to call her a liar and point out the simple truth: no one has won Florida yet, and to claim otherwise is to preempt the democratic process.

The purpose of these lies is to keep the country so inundated with misinformation that public opinion is disoriented and even poisoned. The goal is to cover up the elementary truth that a Bush victory requires the suppression of votes cast in Florida by tens of thousands of people. That is why the Bush campaign opposes a hand recount or any other measure which would result in a more

accurate recording of the actual wishes of the Florida electorate.

The Bush campaign was developing backup plans to hijack the election even before the November 7 vote. As was reported November 1 by the *New York Daily News*, Bush aides were preparing to launch an anti-constitutional effort to overturn a Gore victory in the Electoral College if Bush succeeded in winning the popular vote. This was to center on the use of right-wing talk-radio and other media attacks to generate a “popular uprising” and pressure Gore electors to switch their support to Bush. These methods are now being employed, under differing circumstances, in an effort to stampede public opinion.

Typical of the method of the Big Lie, Bush and his media allies accuse their victims of precisely the crime which they are attempting to carry out—the *New York Post*, for instance, headlined one commentary, “The Hijacking of the Presidency.”

Such provocative language has an additional function. It legitimates in advance whatever outrage may be committed by deranged right-wing elements, the Timothy McVeighs who exist in significant numbers on the fringes of the Republican Party. Their violence could potentially be directed against anyone who opposes Bush's usurpation of power.

There is another sinister aspect of the whole affair. What is taking place today in the United States bears many of the hallmarks of the actions taken by US intelligence agencies to rig elections and topple governments around the world. George W. Bush is unlikely to be anything more than the front man for such an affair. His father, however, was once head of the CIA, as well as commander-in-chief during the Gulf War, and there is no question that the CIA and Pentagon brass are heavily for Bush.

Even while the ballots were being cast on November 7, the Bush campaign was working to preempt the democratic decision of the American people and steal the election. George W. Bush and his campaign aides worked with allies and right-wing operatives in the media to reverse the voting projections based on exit polls in Florida.

The case of John Ellis is only the most visible example of the behind-the-scenes conspiracy to rig the elections. Ellis is the first cousin of the presidential candidate and his brother Jeb, governor of Florida. He was hired by Fox News only a month before the vote to head the network's “call desk”, which handled the state-by-state exit poll results reported by Voters News Service, a consortium of the five major networks, and decided when to declare a state for Bush or Gore.

In that capacity, according to an article in the *New* magazine, confirmed by other press reports, Ellis leaked confidential exit poll information to the Bush camp during the night of November 7, speaking personally to George W. Bush and to Jeb Bush on several occasions. At 2:16 a.m. the morning of November 8, Fox became the first network to “call” Florida for Bush, an action which triggered similar declarations by the other networks—none of them justified by the figures reported by VNS. Within 15 minutes, Vice President Gore was on the phone offering a concession statement which he reversed soon afterwards, after Florida Democrats called Gore headquarters to alert him that the vote totals in the state were still extremely close.

The example of John Ellis demonstrates the critical role which media manipulation has played in the election. It is now clear that the initial exit polls finding Gore the winner in Florida were accurate—they were based, after all, on what voters in Palm Beach County and elsewhere *thought* they had done in the voting booth, which was to give Gore a small but comfortable majority, likely in the range of 100,000 votes or more in that state.

The Bush campaign reacted feverishly to the initial projections of a Gore victory in Florida because they had planned a much different result based on a systematic assault on the rights of voters likely to be pro-Gore, especially black and minority workers. Hundreds of reports have since surfaced of intimidation and suppression of the vote in minority districts, both in urban centers and in heavily black rural areas in the northern panhandle. Both black and white voters reported incidents in which election officials demanded photo IDs of blacks while making no such demand of whites, in an effort to frustrate black participation in the vote.

One of the most flagrant examples involves Duval County, which includes the Jacksonville metropolitan area. This county reported a staggering 27,000 spoiled ballots, nearly as many as the 29,000 recorded in Palm Beach County. According to a report in the online magazine *Salon*, nearly half the spoiled ballots came in just four of the 14 districts of Duval County, those comprising the largely black areas which voted heavily for Gore.

The overall rate of spoiled ballots in Duval County was 7.5 percent, compared to less than 2 percent nationally. This figure rose to a staggering 31 percent in some predominately black precincts. When controversy mounted over the Florida vote, the Democratic county chairman called the county election supervisor, a Republican, to ask how many ballots had been thrown out for double-punching in Duval. He was told that only a few hundred were disqualified—the actual figure was 22,000.

Duval County does not use the butterfly ballot, and there were few calls from confused voters to the election authorities, even though nearly one in ten voters supposedly mispunched their ballots, a rate as high as in Palm Beach. This strongly suggests that the double-punching was the result, not of voter error, but of systematic fraud. This suspicion is underscored by reports from many parts of Florida of voters being given ballots which had already been punched for Bush.

The Duval County case reveals why Bush has adamantly rejected a hand recount even of the counties with a Republican majority—a position which has caused perplexed commentary even

among right-wing media pundits. Bush carried Duval County by a 60-40 margin. But the majority of the ballots excluded in the machine count, which could be restored in a hand count, were in neighborhoods likely to produce more votes for Gore.

As for the likelihood of vote fraud, consider the character of the judges and state officials in Florida whom Bush is relying on to steal the state. The Palm Beach County judge who initially took the lawsuit against the butterfly ballot, Stephen Rapp, had to recuse himself after an affidavit was filed that he had told an attorney in an elevator that he “doing his part to make sure the Democrats are run out of the White House.”

Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris is a multimillionaire former real estate broker, elected in 1998, who was a Bush delegate to the Republican National Convention and is co-chairwoman of the Bush campaign in Florida. A profile in the *Washington Post* paints a picture of a corrupt political hack who traveled at state expense to Barbados, Brazil and other locations of little relevance to Florida election law.

Harris's political career flourished despite a scandal involving illegal campaign contributions to her 1994 state senate campaign by Riscorp, a Florida insurance company. Five people pleaded guilty, Riscorp's founder went to prison, and Harris's campaign director was named an “unindicted co-conspirator.” Harris went on to become the chief election official of the state of Florida.

A right-wing cabal is working deliberately and systematically, using the media and courts as well as the governmental machinery in the state of Florida, to take control of the executive branch and usher in an authoritarian right-wing government. The real strength of these forces, in terms of genuine popular support, is relatively small. They can advance only because of the cowardice of their Democratic Party opponents and the acquiescence of the liberal remnants in the media.

It is significant that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have barely commented on the John Ellis exposure, drawing no conclusions about the deliberate attempt to engineer a concession statement by Gore and preempt the vote count in Florida. The elite daily newspapers and television networks have worked to conceal the most elementary fact about the Florida controversy: that, as the *Palm Beach Post* observed in its editorial on the election crisis: “Partisan rhetoric aside, Republicans are arguing to count fewer votes, while Democrats are arguing to count more.”

Working people cannot rely on Gore or the Democratic Party to oppose the right-wing takeover. They were incapable of conducting a serious and politically principled fight against the first attempt at a political coup, in the Clinton impeachment. At best they will make a rotten compromise, as Clinton did, to hold onto the presidency through further concessions at the expense of workers' interests. At worst they will capitulate and legitimize the coming to power of the most right-wing government in US history.



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