

The US election

Democrats, liberals retreat in the face of Republican provocations

Patrick Martin
25 November 2000

In the ongoing conflict over the presidential election, the Republicans and the extreme right speak the language of war and bloodshed. The Democrats whine about the need for uniting the country and avoiding a divisive struggle. In a street fight between determined fascists and timid liberals, the outcome can be foreseen—not because the ultra-right enjoys genuine popular support—far from it—but because their liberal opponents have largely abandoned the field.

The ferocity of the Republicans was on display Wednesday in Miami, when Republican Party operatives and Cuban fascists mobilized a mob to intimidate the county election board into abandoning the hand recount of presidential votes. The same groups shifted their field of action to neighboring Broward County Thursday and Friday, seeking to forestall the counting of many hundreds of Gore votes that were missed in the initial machine tally.

Republican Party spokesmen—from presidential candidate George W. Bush, to his representative James Baker, to congressional leaders in Washington, to Florida state officials in Tallahassee—have openly declared that a Gore presidency would be the illegitimate result of a “stolen” election, despite the fact that Gore won the national popular vote by a clear margin and still leads in electoral votes, pending the decision in Florida.

Their most rabid supporters in the media, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, have hailed the violence in Miami as proof that the Republican Party is determined to fight for the presidency and will not be held back by scruples over legal precedent, democratic tradition or the right of all citizens to have their votes counted. Enthusiastically citing “the activities of the past several days,” the *Journal* declared in its editorial of November 24, “It’s beginning to look a lot like this is not your father’s GOP.”

The Republican Party has indeed been transformed over the past quarter century into a very different species of political animal. From being the conservative party of big business, committed to “law and order” and bourgeois

respectability, it has become the instrument of fundamentalist zealots, racists and neo-fascists, who see the present election crisis as their opportunity to gain control of the entire apparatus of the federal government—adding the White House to their present narrow margin in Congress and on the US Supreme Court.

The Democratic Party has undergone a parallel rightward evolution, with the result that there is little or no enthusiasm among Democratic officeholders and party officials for a struggle that would require the mobilization of mass popular support. While the Republicans were issuing radio appeals for Cuban fascists to storm the Miami-Dade election board, Democratic Party officials, local and national, were systematically discouraging demonstrations against the suppression of tens of thousands of votes in Palm Beach County, telling union officials and Jesse Jackson to go home—which they did without protest.

Top congressional Democrats are visibly weakening in their support for the Gore campaign, in sharp contrast to the unrestrained howling from their Republican counterparts. Some, like Senator John Breaux of Louisiana, are openly telling Gore to throw in the towel. “The American people are starting to turn off their television sets,” said Breaux. “And they’re starting to look at the home movie channel. It can backfire if either side is perceived as dragging this out.”

Others, like Senator Robert Torricelli of New Jersey, express demoralization and gloom, declaring it “very unlikely” that Gore will receive enough votes in the hand recount to win Florida. “The math is getting difficult,” Torricelli said. “For all of us who want Al Gore to be president, the decision by Miami-Dade officials [to abandon their hand count of ballots] was a devastating blow.”

A handful of Democratic members of the House of Representatives called for a federal investigation into the right-wing campaign to create a “climate of fear” in Miami, citing press accounts that “strongly suggest these actions were orchestrated by the Bush campaign.” But even this

mild protest attracted only the support of the congressman from Broward County, Peter Deutsch, and five members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

A joint statement by the two top congressional Democrats, Tom Daschle and Richard Gephardt, gave only the most perfunctory backing to Gore, while appealing for a more restrained tone in the election dispute. All in all, the congressional Democrats give the impression that they will jump ship as soon as possible and make their peace with the Bush campaign.

Equally cowardly is the attitude of liberal commentators in the media, who have by and large confined themselves to a “plague on both your houses” approach, bemoaning the increasingly bitter character of the conflict over Florida’s electoral votes. Two recent items are particularly noteworthy in this respect.

On Friday, the *Washington Post* published a column by liberal pundit Richard Cohen, who voted for Gore and criticized Bush frequently during the election campaign. In his latest column, Cohen capitulates completely to the right-wing campaign in Florida, writing, “Given the present bitterness, given the angry irresponsible charges being hurled by both camps, the nation will be in dire need of a conciliator, a likable guy who will make things better and not worse. That man is not Al Gore. That man is George W. Bush.”

Cohen combines political idiocy and cowardice. He claims to be opposed to “the present bitterness,” but is willing to concede the presidency to those who are stoking it up, and even parrots the Republican propaganda—which he knows to be a lie—that Bush in the White House would be a force for conciliation and unity. The truth is just the opposite: a president who takes office by means of intimidation and the incitement of right-wing hysteria cannot be an agent for “healing the country.”

On Thursday the *New York Times* published an editorial that for the first time took note of the violent and anti-democratic methods of the Bush campaign and its supporters in Florida. The editorial criticized “intemperate Republican rhetoric” and warned that in its efforts to have the Florida state legislature intervene to overturn the Florida State Supreme Court and name a slate of Republican electors, “the Bush campaign risks undermining the rule of law and the office he hopes to occupy.”

The *Times* piece was one of a growing number of editorials, statements and columns expressing the recognition, at least partially, that what is manifested in the Republican Party’s actions goes beyond the scope of traditional bourgeois politics, and represents a shift to extra-constitutional measures.

A distinctly fascist element is emerging. As Walter

Shapiro put it in his column Friday in *USA Today*: “Less than two years after their failed attempt to oust Bill Clinton from office, many Republicans are beginning to resemble power-hungry generals in a tin-pot Latin American republic.”

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have consistently exposed the American two-party system as a political monopoly of big business. The Democratic and Republican parties both defend the capitalist profit system and the interests of the top one percent who own the bulk of the wealth in America. But this fundamental class identity does not mean there are no important distinctions between the two parties: the Democratic Party is based on traditional bourgeois-democratic forms of rule, while the Republican Party is visibly driving towards the imposition of an authoritarian government which will openly wage war against the living standards, social benefits and democratic rights of the American people.

Recognizing such a difference in no way implies political support for the Democrats. As the presidential crisis makes clear, even more than the attempted coup d’etat mounted by the Republicans in the impeachment conspiracy, the Democratic Party is incapable of conducting a serious struggle against the right-wing threat. The defense of democratic rights is a task that must be taken up by the working class through the building of an independent political movement based on a socialist program.

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