

The New York Times, the Washington Post and the crisis of the 2000 election

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The calls by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* for Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore to forego legal action against ballot irregularities in the pivotal state of Florida expose the indifference of both newspapers to the democratic rights of the American people.

Last Friday, one day after campaign chairman William Daley announced the Gore camp would support legal challenges by Florida voters, and suggested possible legal action by the Gore campaign itself, the *Times* and the *Post* published editorials denouncing the Democratic candidate. Both newspapers joined the growing media chorus demanding that Gore prepare to concede the election to Republican George W. Bush.

The newspapers' disingenuous efforts to cast the Gore camp as the villain in the dispute over Florida's 25 electoral votes were rapidly upset by events. The following morning the Bush campaign announced it was filing suit in federal court to stop local election authorities from conducting a manual recount in four counties where voters had complained of widespread irregularities. The manual review of ballots had already begun in Palm Beach County, where a deceptive ballot led several thousand Gore supporters to mistakenly vote for right-wing Reform Party candidate Patrick Buchanan, and some 19,000 others to select more than one presidential candidate, resulting in the discarding of their ballots.

The *Post* published an editorial on Saturday criticizing the Bush campaign for going to the courts to block an accurate vote count, while reiterating its opposition to any appeal to the courts by Gore. The *Times* did not even go that far. Having roundly denounced Gore for *threatening* to seek legal action, it made no similar criticism when the Bush camp went ahead and did so.

Even prior to its court action the Bush camp had shown undisguised contempt for the concerns of Floridians whose intentions were thwarted by defective ballots and other irregularities. By the time the editors at the *Times* and the *Post* published their broadsides against Gore, the Bush campaign had made crystal clear that its strategy was to preempt an investigation of the Florida travesty and bully its way into the White House, relying on the media to disarm public opposition and counting on the time-tested cowardice of the Democrats themselves. Meanwhile, a machine recount of Florida ballots had reduced the margin for Bush—out of 6 million votes cast statewide—from the 1,725 announced on election day to a mere 327.

Nevertheless, the *Times* began its November 10 editorial by placing the onus on Gore, declaring that he had “escalated the atmosphere of combat surrounding the presidential election results with his decision to go to court in Florida.” The newspaper denounced Gore aides for “using the language of constitutional crisis” and accused the

Democratic candidate of a “rush to litigation.”

In a similar vein, the *Post* censured Gore campaign manager William Daley for saying at his November 9 press conference, “If the will of the people is to prevail, Al Gore should be awarded a victory in Florida and be our next president.” The newspaper characterized as “poisonous” the suggestion that a Bush victory would mean “the White House had been stolen.”

The *Post* continued: “Mr. Daley and others in the campaign also continue to imply that Mr. Gore's narrow lead in the popular vote somehow gives him superior status—if not quite a partial claim to the office, then a greater right to contest the electoral outcome in Florida. But that's false, and they know it. The electoral vote is what matters.”

It is true that under the archaic electoral provisions of the US Constitution, the candidate who receives a majority of electoral votes, even if he or she loses the popular vote, assumes the presidency. But anyone who takes seriously the proposition that an election should express the will of the people has to place enormous weight on the outcome of the popular vote, and insist that every avenue be explored to insure that the winner of the popular vote is not deprived of office as a result of either fraud or gross irregularities in a given state. In this sense, basic adherence to democratic principles demands precisely that the winner of the popular vote be accorded a “superior status.”

In the current situation, moreover, Bush's claim to a majority of electoral votes rests entirely on the compromised and flawed results of the popular vote in Florida, where Bush's brother is the governor and presides over the electoral process. Given the situation in Florida, Daley's assertion that the will of the Florida electorate can be expressed only in a victory for Gore is a simple statement of fact.

The arguments advanced by the *Times* and the *Post* underscore their contempt for democratic principles. They declare that any appeal to the courts by the Gore campaign is illegitimate. This ignores the grievances of citizens in Florida whose only recourse to the negation of their voting rights is to seek redress in the courts. More broadly, it dismisses the concerns of tens of millions of Americans who have a vital stake in the outcome of the election.

How is the Gore campaign to oppose a manifestly unfair and undemocratic conclusion to the election other than appealing to the courts—especially under conditions where the other side is determined to preempt a serious investigation? Neither the *Times* nor the *Post* answers this question.

If one proceeds not from considerations of political expediency and the protection of vested interests, but rather from the premise that elections should express the popular will, then it is clear that Gore is obliged to reject demands that he concede and instead explore every possible legal avenue so long as the results of the election remain in

dispute.

The *Times* and the *Post* argue that the election should be decided simply by the eventual vote count in Florida, including the overseas absentee ballots due to be tallied by November 17. The defective Palm Beach ballot should not be taken into account. Nor should allegations by minority voters in other parts of the state of intimidation by the police and election authorities, and numerous reports of ballot boxes gone astray (in a state that is notorious for past ballot rigging).

Such a solution is a patent violation of democratic rights, and the installation of a president on such a basis would amount to the imposition of a government on the population. Moreover, the results of the cursory recount undertaken to date, far from boosting the claims of the Bush camp, drastically undermine them. The supposed margin of Bush's victory in Florida, without taking into account any of the contested votes, has fallen since election day by more than 81 percent.

Even if the figure of 327 is bolstered by a thousand or more votes from absentee ballots, the difference between Bush and Gore will remain a minuscule percentage of the 6 million votes cast in Florida. No reliance can be placed on a majority that comprises such a tiny percentage of the overall vote in the state. And in a national election where 105 million people cast votes, to insist that the people uncritically accept an outcome based on the number of people who could fit into a moderate-size banquet hall is altogether preposterous.

Given the fact that there is no clear victor in the state, two possible approaches are available. The first is problematic, but not unconstitutional. Florida could be excluded from the electoral vote count. This solution, however, and with good reason, would not be acceptable to the people of Florida.

Therefore, the only viable solution is to revisit the balloting in the state. This is clearly justified by the abundant evidence of voting irregularities, above all in Palm Beach County. Here again there are two possible courses of action. A new vote could be held in the county. Alternately, a careful examination of the 19,000 Palm Beach ballots discarded for double-voting could be carried out in order to determine statistically what percentage should be awarded to Gore and what percentage should go to Bush.

If, for example, such an examination showed that 18,000 of the ballots were marked for Gore and another candidate, and 1,000 were marked for Bush and another candidate, the votes could be apportioned to the contending camps accordingly.

It is obvious that in either case the result would be a state-wide plurality for Gore of thousands of votes, which is precisely why all of the efforts of the Bush camp, with the blessings of the *Times* and the *Post*, are concentrated on preventing such a process. The entire argument of the Bush campaign, when stripped of its legal and constitutional pretensions, comes down to the fact that it is the beneficiary of massive voting irregularities, if not outright fraud, and it wants to prevent anyone from examining the situation.

The response of the liberal press to the electoral impasse is indicative of the essence of the political crisis. The dispute over the succession of state power manifests the breakdown of the institutions of American bourgeois democracy under the pressure of immense divisions and tensions that have built up within the US.

At the heart of the rifts within the body politic is an enormous growth of social inequality. Over the past decade, in particular, the most privileged 5 or 10 percent of the population has enriched itself at a staggering rate, while the social position of the vast majority of the population has stagnated or declined. For all the talk among official opinion-makers of a prosperous and complacent nation, the class

divisions in the United States are more stark and potentially explosive today than at any point in the postwar period.

A whole layer of the liberal establishment has benefited from the general redistribution of the national wealth from the working masses to those on the top rungs of the economic ladder. Sated and corrupted by bloated stock portfolios and six-digit salaries, it has grown increasingly alienated and contemptuous of the broad masses of the population. For this layer, political stability—i.e., defense of the status quo—is incomparably more important than the defense of democratic rights.

This is the social layer for which the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* speak. Their differences with the forces represented by Bush and the Republicans do not go very deep. If it comes down to a choice between the camp of unabashed social reaction and the danger of the working class breaking free of the corporate-controlled two-party system, they organically and instinctively choose the former.

The same dynamic is at work in the Democratic Party itself, a capitalist party whose defense of the working man was always more pretense than reality. Both the Clinton administration and the Gore election campaign have epitomized the trajectory of this party to the right, its estrangement from the working masses and the narrowing of its real base to sections of finance capital and highly privileged layers of the middle class.

Millions of workers, especially from the most oppressed sections of the working class, voted for Gore to prevent the installation of a Republican administration. But experience will demonstrate, sooner rather than later, that this flaccid party, which combines hollow talk of reforms with servility to big business, cannot be relied on to defend the democratic rights and social conditions of working people from the assault of the extreme right. The next stage of the political crisis will raise with ever greater urgency the necessity for the working class to build its own mass party, and advance its own, democratic and socialist solution to the American malaise.



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