On-the-spot report from Florida

# Palm Beach becomes battleground in US election crisis

**David Walsh**
**16 November 2000**

Palm Beach County in Florida has been at the center of political controversy since November 7. Whether initially the victims of poor ballot design or outright fraud, thousands of residents in West Palm Beach, along with tens of thousands throughout Florida, have been denied their basic right to cast a vote for the candidate of their choice. Tens of thousands of votes were declared ineligible in the presidential balloting and thousands of residents have registered their protests with officials.

The crisis began last Tuesday and it has not let up yet. The local canvassing board has proposed to do a manual recount of the ballots, in accordance with Florida state law, but this effort has been held up by Republican Party legal maneuvers and the confusion or temporizing of the majority on the board.

An ongoing assault on democratic rights is being engineered by the Republican Party, its Florida apparatus headed by Texas Governor George W. Bush's brother, Florida governor Jeb Bush, and a team of lawyers determined to block any effort to establish a fair counting of the votes. At the same time a public relations campaign is under way to stampede public opinion, asserting that "enough is enough," "Bush has won" and the country "wants to move on." The Republicans hope to stall a manual recount of the votes until political conditions make conducting it impossible.

Broadly speaking, the forces in Palm Beach County present themselves in the following fashion: representatives and supporters of the Republican Party, aggressive and right-wing, refusing to "play by the rules" in their efforts to insure victory for Texas Governor Bush; the Democratic Party officialdom, flaccid, conventional and generally unprepared for the Republican onslaught; the cynical and shallow media; and, least considered, angry Democratic voters, alarmed by the prospect of a Bush victory.

Until November 8 Palm Beach County would not have appeared on anyone's list of the most likely locations for a national political controversy. It is best known for its sunshine, palm trees and ocean beaches, and as the retirement home of thousands of primarily Jewish retirees, many of them originally from the Northeast. Blacks made up 12.8 percent of the population; Hispanics, 9.6 percent. The median household income is $46,000, higher than neighboring Miami-Dade and Broward (Fort Lauderdale) counties.

From the moment they voted, a large number of residents voiced fears that they had mistakenly voted for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan. I spoke to a rabbi Tuesday night who pointed out that his congregation included more than one hundred concentration camp survivors. He described the devastation of many at the possibility they had mistakenly chosen Buchanan, a friend of anti-Semites and Holocaust deniers, on the confusing two-page ballot.

As of Thursday morning the suspension of the hand recount in Palm Beach County remained in effect as the three-person county canvassing board awaited a decision by the state's Supreme Court. The court is deciding which state official—Secretary of State Katherine Harris, who said the county could not continue with the manual recounting, or the state's Attorney General Bob Butterworth, who said it could—was correct.

The high court, in response to a petition by the canvassing board, has given Harris and Butterworth until 9 a.m. Thursday to file written responses; any other parties, including the Gore and Bush campaigns and Broward County officials, have until noon. The board will reconvene in the afternoon.

As all the participants awaited word from the court on Wednesday, Republican Party strategy could be seen on various fronts. Their actions here are of a piece with their method of operation during the impeachment crisis: endless legal maneuvers, combined with attempts to target and "eliminate" opponents who stand in their way. One of the targets of Republican ire in Palm Beach County has been canvassing board member Carol Roberts. She has been particularly vocal in her attempt to see a hand recount undertaken and the grievances of residents addressed.

One of the first efforts of the day was an affidavit submitted by Republican lawyers calling on Roberts to recuse herself from the process on the grounds that she had acted improperly during Saturday's hand recount of four county voting precincts. The appeal accused Roberts of "picking up numerous ballots from the questionable ballot pile and the Gore ballot pile and then interspersing the ballots between piles. On approximately thirty separate occasions, Roberts touched the chads on the ballots themselves instead of holding the edges of the ballot further contributing to the degradation of ballots.... Another observer of the ballot recount personally observed Roberts forcefully bending, twisting, poking, and purposefully manipulating ballots in a manner that compromises their integrity."

Essentially this affidavit is charging Roberts with criminal activity. This is the same method of character assassination and public smearing of individuals that the Republican right engaged in during the impeachment crisis. Democratic Party officials have responded limply to the witch-hunt that has been launched against Roberts, and it has not been criticized in any manner by the media. Roberts refused to disqualify herself.

Speaking of the media, the television networks, in particular, physically dominate the parking lot outside the Emergency Operations Center where press conferences and the canvassing board's public meetings take place. Millions of dollars of the most up-to-date equipment is on hand. The technically imposing character of the media's presence is in inverse proportion to their intellectual weight. For the most part this extraordinary technology is in the hands of cynical and shallow individuals. The television newspeople, on the whole, are astonishingly young, attractive and stupid, both male and female. The questions asked, with great

© World Socialist Web Site

aggressiveness, are generally trivial, concentrating attention on the minutiae of the electoral process. Although there is a general recognition that this is a remarkable situation, the well-heeled media personalities have no clue as to the historical import of these events.

Following an initial public meeting Wednesday morning of the canvassing board—Carol Roberts, Judge Charles Burton and Theresa LePore, accompanied by County Attorney Denise Dytrych—a lawyer for the Democrats, Dennis Newman, told the press that the Republicans from the beginning had not wanted a fair count of the votes: "It is ridiculous to think that 10,000 voters in Palm Beach County, whose votes have been thrown out, went to the polls, stood in line for hours, and did not vote for president of the United States." Newman commented, "The Republicans are frightened to have a fair and accurate counting of the votes, because they know that when they are counted, Vice President Gore will be the winner." He described the allegations against Roberts as "ridiculous." He noted that in 99.9 percent of all cases the counters and observers had agreed on the ballots. Newman said Harris was trying to "disenfranchise" thousands of voters in Palm Beach County and throughout the state.

Newman mentioned the impeachment hearings in his comments. When I asked him about a connection between the current crisis and the impeachment, he suggested that the method of "character assassination" against Roberts represented a continuity of Republican tactics. In regard to the political similarity between the two crises, Newman had little to say. He simply pointed out that the "party making both accusations [against Bill Clinton and Roberts, presumably] are the same."

I spoke to Bert Aronson, the Palm Beach County Democratic official who made the comment that Pat Buchanan could not have received thousands of votes because there were not "three thousand Nazis in Palm Beach County." On Wednesday he too indicated that the Republicans were afraid of a manual recount because they know they would lose such a tally. "If the popular vote of the United States were against Al Gore, maybe we would all have packed it in and gone home. It's a possibility. Having the popular vote lends credence to our effort. This is why 70 percent of the American people are saying 'Go ahead, get the count right.'" When asked point blank if there was a political connection between the impeachment witch-hunt and the Republican effort to have Bush declared the winner of the election, Aronson said he saw no such link.

One of the most distinctive features of the Palm Beach events has been the presence of a group of Bush supporters operating in a sinister and threatening fashion. On Monday about 100 Bush supporters stationed themselves at the front of a downtown stage and shouted down Jesse Jackson as he attempted to speak. They succeeded in breaking up the rally. On Tuesday evening, as Democratic State Senator Ron Klein attempted to address the press, 20 or so Bush enthusiasts surrounded him and acted in an extremely hostile fashion.

The Bush group is made up of college students, Cuban right-wingers, Christian fundamentalists and outright thugs. In this extreme right element one is perhaps seeing the evolution of American stormtroopers at an embryonic stage. There is certainly an attempt under way to intimidate the Palm Beach County officials, legally and physically. One of the Bush backers could be overheard saying that he had told his "pastor" that it was time to "start playing hard ball."

Marla Ruzicka, 23, an officially accredited observer from the Green Party, commented on the tactics of the Bush supporters. She described them as "really nasty. There was one guy with a bald head, like a skinhead. They surrounded me and called me a baby killer, because of my support for the right to abortion. When I pointed out Bush's presiding over the death penalty, they said: no, no, that's justice. They're scary. Maybe they're the ones who should be on the terrorist lists."

Ruzicka noted the absence of pro-Gore demonstrators and wondered why the Democrats weren't mobilizing their own supporters. "People should be out in the streets. The Democrats won't energize anyone. There should be a recount. This whole process is ridiculous," she added.

Democratic Party officials, as I've already indicated, evince a combination of complacency and evasiveness in regard to the threat from the extreme right. No one is prepared to denounce the danger represented by the semi-fascistic character of the Republican grab for power.

I spoke to Ron Klein, the local state senator who had been surrounded the previous evening by hostile Bush supporters. All he could bring himself to do was chastise their "discourteous and rude" behavior. He also failed to see any link between the present drama and the impeachment crisis.

Klein stated: "There may be some differences as to how this election should turn out. Every American wants a fair election. There might be a difference of opinion on a recount. I don't appreciate the people who were yelling. We don't treat each other violently in this country. Impeachment got to be a very rude process, on both sides to a certain extent. Americans came away from that feeling very bad about the political system.

"As long as the rule of law prevails, at the end of the day there has to be legitimacy. This is a small minority who are acting like this. The majority of Americans want a fair recount. There is a concerted effort to block a recount because they are afraid of the outcome. The issue is the right to vote and to have your vote counted."

One has the sense that the Democrats are engaged in a continual effort to avoid the stark political realities and proceed with business as usual, while the other side has openly declared war on the entire process.

The few Democratic Party supporters who did show up Wednesday to oppose the Bush camp's efforts were considerably more passionate about insuring a recount and a Gore victory than the Democrats themselves.

I spoke to two retired Palm Beach County residents who explained that the arrows on the ballots had not lined up with the hole. Alan and Johanna Krieger, originally from Ohio and in Palm Beach for 29 years, explained that they were not certain they had voted for the candidate of their choice. "We need new balloting machines here, instead of a new bullet train and all these other construction projects," said Mr. Krieger, formerly a barber in Cleveland. "Having a one-left and one-right page was confusing." Mrs. Krieger commented, "The ballot was illegal. We should have revoted, we should even now." Krieger went on, "They're pulling a bait and switch on us. We're fortunate even to get a recount, much less a revote."

Bob Kunst, from Miami Beach, held up a sign accusing the Republicans of "stealing" the election. In conversation he repeated the charge that "the election is being stolen by the Bush gang. They don't trust the people or they would have no problem with a recount, or a revote. They're tying us up, with his brother Jeb leading the way. George W. Bush is such a lowlife. If he is screwing us in Florida, what would he do to the country? There are 190,000 votes thrown out. I can't stand either one, throw the bums out. Jeb too. If Bush takes power, there will be a million people in Washington on January 20. We're not going to put up with it.

"I think it's an outrage that people were disenfranchised. Palm Beach is just the tip of the iceberg. In Miami 17,000 votes were thrown out on illegalities; we don't even know what it's all about. There are votes punched in advance, for Bush. The whole state is a sleaze. This guy is such a phony and a hypocrite.

"There's no end to it. Watergate, Whitewater. They were so obsessed with Bill Clinton and his orgasms that for two years they couldn't do the public's business. This is a monstrous group of people, who are only concerned with tearing the country apart. They're not interested in uniting anybody."

This outrage that basic rights have been extensively violated is shared by thousands in Palm Beach County and throughout the state of Florida. It will not, however, find expression through any of the official channels. The Democrats, Gore and Jesse Jackson on down, are blind to the political dangers or frightened of their consequences. They represent, in the final

© World Socialist Web Site

analysis, a different faction of the same ruling elite that the Republicans speak for, and the last thing they want to do is arouse social passions whose consequences might threaten the stability of the present social order.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**

© World Socialist Web Site