

## The US election

# Anatomy of a right-wing riot—the Republican mob attack in Miami-Dade

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More details have come to light concerning the events on Wednesday at the Miami-Dade County Canvassing Board that led to the board's decision to halt manual recounting of ballots in the presidential election. The board's sudden announcement that it was abandoning the recount meant that hundreds of votes, mostly for Democratic candidate Al Gore, would not be included in the official state-wide tally.

The protesters who mobbed the board's proceedings were not—as had been generally portrayed in the media—a collection of “outraged citizens” and rank-and-file Republicans who came together in a spontaneous outburst of indignation. The mini-riot was a carefully orchestrated operation designed by the Bush camp to halt the manual recounting of ballots that had been authorized only one day before by the Florida Supreme Court.

According to a report on ABCNews.com, the participants were not for the most part local party activists, but rather Republican Party operatives who have been functioning out of a large mobile home in Miami, some having come from as far away as Washington DC and New York City. These individuals were tight-lipped when questioned by a CNN reporter about who was in charge of their activities.

On Tuesday night Bush campaigners began phoning Republican Party members, urging them to join the out-of-state operatives in an anti-recount protest the next morning at Miami's County Hall. At 8 a.m. Wednesday, a meeting of the board of canvassers voted to abandon a full hand recount of Miami-Dade's 654,000 ballots and proceed instead with a hand count of approximately 10,000 “undervotes”—ballots for which no presidential choice had been registered in the original machine

count. Since most of these ballots were from Democratic precincts, the board's action outraged the Bush camp, which proceeded to organize a violent provocation.

A crowd of about 150 pro-Bush protesters gathered outside the room on the 18th floor of County Hall where the board of canvassers was meeting to begin the recount. In an effort to expedite the counting process, the board decided to move its proceedings—and the disputed ballots—to a room on the 19th floor where the general public would be excluded, but two representatives from both the Republican and Democratic parties would be allowed to observe.

At that point, according to a November 24 column by Paul Gigot in the *Wall Street Journal*, New York Rep. John Sweeney, a Republican “monitor” on the scene, gave the order to “shut it down.” The throng of Republican protesters moved to the 19th floor and began pounding on the doors of the county elections department, chanting, “Stop the count, stop the fraud!”

Numerous incidents of violence on the part of the demonstrators were reported. The crowd chased down Miami-Dade Democratic Party Chairman Joe Geller, screaming that he was stealing a ballot. (It turned out he was carrying a sample ballot.) The mob attempted to rush the doors to the 19th floor elections office, and several people were trampled and manhandled in the process. Luis Rosero, a Democratic aide, told the *New York Times* that he was punched and kicked in the scuffle.

Key in mobilizing personnel for the Republican onslaught was the Spanish-language radio station, Radio Mambi. In an effort to whip up a lynch-mob hysteria, Republicans accused the Miami-Dade election

officials of deliberately excluding Hispanic precincts, areas politically dominated by right-wing Cuban exiles that had voted overwhelmingly for Bush.

Radio Mambi reporter Evilio Cepero played a key part in fomenting the violence, chanting over a megaphone “Denounce the recount!”, “Stop the injustice!” His calls for people to come down to the demonstration were repeatedly broadcast over Radio Mambi, and he telephoned interviews with Republican Party politicians that were relayed by the station.

According to Gigot's column in the *Wall Street Journal*, Republicans on the scene told the besieged election officials that “1,000 local Cuban Republicans” were on their way to the demonstration. The prospect of facing a mob of anti-Castro fascists—who earlier this year illegally held young Elian Gonzales in defiance of government orders to return him to his father, and whose leading figures have been linked to terrorist actions against Cuba—undoubtedly unnerved the canvassing board members, who had good cause to fear for their lives.

Gigot, who in addition to penning a weekly column for the *Wall Street Journal* is a regular commentator on the Public Broadcasting System's Newshour television program, enthuses in his *Journal* article over the success of the mob attack: “The canvassers then stunned everybody and caved. They cancelled any recount and certified the original Nov. 7 election vote.... Republicans rejoiced and hugged like they'd just won the lottery.”

This provocation, utilizing an openly fascistic element within Miami's Cuban-American population, underscores the threat to democratic rights represented by the ultra-right forces that have come to dominate the Republican Party. The Republicans' reliance on traveling thugs operating out of a mobile home, employing violence and mob tactics to thwart a court-sanctioned recount of ballots, is indicative of the methods the party is employing in its attempt to hijack the presidential election.

In a belated response to Wednesday's events, Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman on Friday issued a meek appeal for the Republicans to curb their operatives' activities in Florida: “These demonstrations were clearly designed to intimidate and to prevent a simple count of votes from going forward,” he said. “This is a time to honor

the rule of law, not surrender to the rule of the mob.”

Lieberman's plea was the latest in a series of futile appeals from the Gore camp for the Republicans to rein in their forces. Meanwhile, the Democrats have discouraged any mobilization of popular opposition to Republican sabotage of the court-mandated recount.

The Democrats are far more concerned with obscuring the fascistic character of the so-called “base” of the Republican Party—and the danger it represents—than organizing a defense of democratic rights, even if this means acceding to an illegitimate seizure of the White House.

One of the crassest expressions of Democratic pandering to the Republican right was Gore's role in the Elian Gonzales affair, when he publicly broke with the policy of his own administration to back the efforts of the Cuban exile groups in Miami to prevent the boy from being returned to his father. Ironically, but not unexpectedly, these same forces are now providing the shock troops in the Republican campaign to hijack the election.

The media has played a predictably foul role in covering for the Republican Party operatives. Initially there was a certain note of alarm in reports about the events at the Miami-Dade canvassing board. The networks showed footage of the mob rampaging through the county building and banging on doors. But the story was relegated quickly to the back burner.

There was virtually no attempt to reveal who and what was behind the mob tactics. One MSNBC commentator argued that the protesters were simply exercising their “democratic rights.” The connection between the Republican assault and the decision by the Miami-Dade canvassers to abandon the recount was barely noted.



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