The US election

Bush campaign organized Republican riot to halt Miami-Dade recount

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A detailed account by the pro-Republican *Wall Street Journal* confirms that last week's mini-riot outside the offices of the Miami-Dade County Canvassing Board was organized and financed by the Bush-Cheney campaign and top leaders in the Republican Congress.

On November 22, a violent crowd of about 150 Republican Party protesters rampaged through Miami's County Hall after the canvassing board decided to concentrate its recount on the approximately 10,000 “undervotes”—ballots for which no presidential choice had been registered by the original machine count. The Republican demonstrators banged and kicked on the doors and windows of the 19th floor office where the board had moved the count, as well as physically assaulting a number of Democratic Party representatives on the scene.

Not long after the Republican rampage, the board decided to stop its manual recount of the county's presidential ballots altogether. The hand recount had been authorized the previous day by the Florida Supreme Court. It is widely acknowledged in the press that the board's action meant that hundreds of votes, mostly for Democratic candidate Al Gore, went uncounted as a result.

These facts have been barely reported in the media because they provide further proof that the Republicans and Bush have been working relentlessly from Election Day on to gain Florida's 25 electoral votes by means of voter intimidation and fraud. One of their key strategies has been to stop the counting of votes. The press, however, has been quick to legitimize the Republicans' tactics. At a press conference organized by the Gore campaign on Tuesday one reporter asked the Democratic candidate: “In terms of your challenge in Miami-Dade, what is wrong with Republicans showing up at the election canvassing board and expressing their displeasure at the process?”

According to the *Journal* article, published November 27, the mini-riot at the canvassing board was part of a full-scale Republican operation, and the rampaging demonstrators were not rank-and-file local Republicans, but “Capitol Hill aides on all-expenses paid trips, courtesy of the Bush campaign.”

The *Journal* was informed by several GOP aides that the office of Republican Congressional Whip Tom DeLay “took charge of the effort on Capitol Hill, passing on an offer many staffers couldn't refuse: free air fare, accommodations and food in the Sunshine State—all paid for by the Bush campaign.” DeLay, one of the most right-wing figures in the Republican Congress, played the central role in pushing the Clinton impeachment through Congress.

An estimated 200 Republican congressional staffers reportedly signed up for the Florida operation. They were put up in beach-front hotels and received generous food allowances. Another *Journal* source said that as many as 750 operatives have been rotated in and out of the state since November 7. Staffers involved in the operation often receive their marching orders for the next day by way of memos pushed under their hotel-room doors late at night. One aide told the *Journal*: “To tell you the truth, nobody knows who is calling the shots.”

After the Miami incident, the roving band—which has its headquarters in a mobile home—moved on to Broward County where a recount was still under way. On Sunday, Republican protesters clashed with Democrats in West Palm Beach as they awaited the

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announcement by Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris on certification of the state's vote total.

The Bush campaign has not spoken publicly about its specific role in commanding the Republican mob actions at the Miami-Dade canvassing board. But on Thanksgiving evening, following a lavish dinner given for the Republican operatives at the Hyatt Hotel in Ft. Lauderdale, a conference call from Bush and running mate Dick Cheney was reportedly broadcast for the benefit of those in attendance. The remarks from the Republican candidates included joking references to the previous day's incident in Miami, according to staffers.

Time Europe's online edition relates details about other factors that may have contributed to the Miami-Dade canvassing board's decision to call off the hand recount. These involve ties between Miami's right-wing, anticommunist Cuban exile community and the Republican Party.

Just prior to the board's decision to call off the recount last Wednesday, a group of Cuban-Americans marched on Clark Center, where the canvassing board offices are located. The fascistic throng had been mobilized by calls from the right-wing radio station, Radio Mambi, which had been broadcasting from the scene throughout the morning, urging Cuban-American Republicans to join the anti-recount demonstrators.

Dade County Judge Lawrence King, the chairman of the Miami-Dade canvassing board and a Democrat, has close ties to the ultra-right, anti-Castro forces in Miami. Armando Gutierrez is retained on his staff as a paid political consultant. Guitierrez was responsible for distributing the infamous video of Elian Gonzales in which the young boy was obviously manipulated into saying he did not want to return to Cuba.

These ties between the chairman of the canvassing board and the Cuban exile community in Miami cry out for an explanation and investigation. Was Judge King aware in advance of these plans to intimidate the canvassing board? Did he warn his fellow canvassers? Did he work to try to pressure them into calling off the recount?

Time Europe also reports that, according to sources close to Miami-Dade County Mayor Alex Penelas, Republican political consultant Herman Echevarria approached Penelas (a Cuban-American and a Democrat) to see if the mayor “might talk” to the canvassing board about stopping the recount. While Penelas had once been a close political ally of Al Gore, relations between the two had been strained because of the role of the Clinton administration in the Elian Gonzales affair. Penelas had at one point vowed to refuse to cooperate with any federal effort to reunite the boy with his father.

Penelas reportedly chose not to speak with Echevarria. Whether he did or did not, however, the fact remains that the Bush campaign and the Republican Party utilized mob tactics—combined with threats to mobilize ultra-right Cuban-exile fanatics—to sabotage and halt a recount of votes in Miami-Dade County that had been ordered by the state Supreme Court.

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