

Britain's press warns that US election crisis threatens global stability

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British coverage of the contested US presidential election results is as partisan as anything that exists in the American media, and sometimes just as shallow.

Right-wing Conservative newspapers such as Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* and *The Times*, as well as the *Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail* and others, have championed a Republican victory. The *Sun* in particular has supported every effort made by George W. Bush's legal team to block an accurate count of the Florida vote and repeatedly denounced Al Gore and the Democrats as crooks and gangsters.

What unites these journals is a belief that a significant shift to the right in the US will strengthen Conservative forces internationally. British politics, in particular, has walked in lock step with America for the past two decades. The right-wing yearn for a return to the golden days of the Reagan-Thatcher era, as opposed to the centre-right partnership between Clinton and Blair. Despite Blair's best efforts to please big business, they view the past few years as an enforced retreat from the sustained offensive against workers' living standards that took place during Thatcher's term of office. They also vehemently oppose the Labour government's attempts to orientate Britain economically, politically and militarily closer to the European Union. A Bush presidency would, they believe, offer a chance to renew the old Cold War "special relationship" between the two Atlantic neighbours and thus strengthen Britain's hand against its main European rivals, Germany and France.

For opposing reasons, the pro-Labour/liberal press has supported a Gore-Democrat presidency as a means of continuing the political perspective embodied in the "Third Way". They fear both a return to the naked class confrontations that epitomised the 1980s and the development of an irreparable breach between Britain and Europe, which now constitutes the UK's main trading partner. They consider Bush an unreliable ally, given the growing antagonisms between the US and Europe, and the stated intention of a Republican administration to disengage itself militarily from European affairs. As well as these considerations, they have also voiced concerns over the Republicans' willingness to ride roughshod over the democratic process and the implications this has for the stability of the world's premier super-power.

The *Daily Mirror* devoted seven full pages of one edition to

listing the biographies and photos of those Governor Bush has had executed in Texas, pointing out that he will probably be in charge of the most powerful military machine in the world. The piece was headlined with the single word "Lethal", superimposed over Bush's portrait. Its December 6 editorial said of a Bush presidency, "we need not expect help from him in Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslav states or any hotspots that flare up. We don't want to be pessimistic. But it is impossible to have high hopes of a man who became President through electoral fraud."

The *Guardian* has run numerous articles exposing irregularities in the Florida ballot and denouncing "Republican fixers". It warned on November 28, for example, that, "Americans, until now for the most part wallowing serenely in a sea of complacency, must finally be awakening to the prospect of a full-blown constitutional crisis."

Its December 4 editorial openly denounced electoral fraud by the Republicans. It cited the deliberate exclusion of black voters on polling day, as well as efforts by Florida's Republican secretary of state Katherine Harris and Governor Jeb Bush to conduct, "a systematic purge of the electoral rolls earlier this year" to exclude "thousands of voters" on "erroneous grounds". It recommended that Gore "bite the bullet and ask the courts to take a closer look at the pre-poll activities of Ms Harris, Jeb Bush and others. For what is alleged here goes far beyond incompetence. Put bluntly, it stinks."

The *Independent's* November 18 edition warned that, "the US is now divided in every way possible—politically, socially, geographically, racially. The new president will hit the ground stumbling and after a brief honeymoon will be derided in the press as a do-nothing and, in Mr Bush's case perhaps, a know-nothing president who cannot work well with Congress and commands little authority at home."

Ten days later, the *Independent* added, "To survive, political systems—even one as battle-hardened as that of the US—depend on a basic degree of consent by opposing parties. That consent is now perilously close to vanishing... America, as it approaches the political precipice, may be about to learn that winning is not really everything; it is surpassed in importance by a functioning constitutional system."

The pro-Labour press is not alone in voicing concerns over

the discrediting of America's democratic process and the future course of political and social relations in the aftermath of the US electoral debacle.

They have been joined by the more serious journals that are supportive of a Bush presidency. The *Economist* of November 25, for example, warned of “a turn towards unrestrained partisan warfare and a possible constitutional crisis”, noting that the “atmosphere surrounding the [Florida] recount became hysterical.” It castigated the Republicans for threatening to use “their political clout in the [Florida] state legislature and Congress” as a “travesty of democracy” and a “grotesque picture for the United States to present to other less healthy democracies around the world”.

The *Financial Times* is the favoured organ of big business in Britain and has a wide readership all over the world. As such it has done more than most in seeking to estimate the impact of events both within the US and internationally.

Regarding political life in America, the *FT*'s November 23 edition noted, “The rhetoric has taken on a shrillness in the past week not usually heard outside the narrow confines of the country's left and rightwing extremists. The hostility of the exchanges threatens to poison the country's political institutions in a way that could be even worse than the partisanship of the impeachment drama.”

It continued, “The next president will have to govern with a fractured Congress... His questionable election will be the subject of journalistic and perhaps even Congressional investigations for years to come. Members of Congress of both parties believe whichever candidate wins, his party will haemorrhage seats at the mid-term elections in two years. He will take office against a background of darkening economic skies brought on by growing financial uncertainty that many economists believe could end the 10-year long economic expansion next year. But by the time he takes office in January, that next president will already have frittered away much of his precious political capital in a ruinous, winner-lose-all struggle through the courts.”

On November 12, the *FT* had sought to estimate the international ramifications of a “weak and defensive presidency”. It warned that this would be “bad not just for the US but, because of America's extraordinary pre-eminence as the world's solitary superpower, it is bad for us all.”

However, the *FT* went on to explain that their concerns are not simply that the US will be weakened but that it is also ever more ready to assert its interests over those of Europe. For this reason a Bush presidency could mean greater conflict between the world's major powers. They write, “With every passing year since the end of the Cold War, American predominance in economic, technological and security matters has become more pronounced. It has not produced isolationism, although that is the word Democrats use to denounce their Republican rivals. It has produced unilateralism. America simply does not need to listen to what its partners have to say.”

FT cites the example of Washington's planned National Missile Defence (NMD)—which it describes as a “post-Star Wars idea that America can and should protect itself against intercontinental ballistic missiles fired by rogue states”. It notes that “Most if not all of America's Nato allies are deeply suspicious of NMD, because they fear it will unleash a new arms race”, but, “Bush is strongly committed to NMD, as a symbol of his desire to boost defence spending. Mr Gore is more dubious. His advisers are divided. But both men will be under fierce pressure from the Pentagon and the defence industry to give it a green light.”

Moreover, “America is profoundly disinclined to get involved in peacekeeping. There will be pressure on either Mr Bush or Mr Gore to pull back from the Balkans. But if Washington then takes sides—by backing independence for Kosovo, for example—it could destabilise the region once more.

“Or what if there is a new flare-up between China and Taiwan? A US president wavering between rival lobby groups could simply make matters worse.”

Such albeit guarded comments give expression to the possible political fault lines that may open up between Europe and America in the coming period. With this in mind, even if the more right-wing sections of Britain's ruling class get what they want—a Bush presidency—they may yet live to regret it.

The *FT* and *Economist* have also both placed great emphasis on Bush making every effort to build bridges to the Democrats by including them in his cabinet, in order to restore political consensus. Without this, they warn, Bush's “victory” would prove to be pyrrhic due to a popular backlash against him. These remarks are extremely cautious. The danger is presented as a subsequent Democratic victory in the Congressional elections in two years time. But the clear implication is that a continuation of “unrestrained partisan warfare” would further polarise the whole of American society, threatening to unleash political conflicts that may not be contained within the traditional channels of the two-party system.



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