A distinction to be noted

George W. Bush: president-elect or president-select?

Barry Grey
29 December 2000

Since Al Gore's December 13 concession speech, Texas Governor George W. Bush has been given the title president-elect. This is the term traditionally accorded to the individual who is elected by the voters.

In this case, however, the designation is entirely inappropriate. The Republican candidate did not gain the presidency as a result of a popular mandate. Not only did Bush lose the popular vote nationally, he would have lost the popular vote in Florida had not five US Supreme Court justices intervened to overturn an order of the Florida high court and stop the counting of votes in that pivotal state.

Bush was not elected president, he was *selected* by judicial fiat. He should, by rights, be called the president-select.

The fact that this distinction has been universally ignored by the media and the political establishment is indicative of their desire to bury the events of recent weeks and, in the prevailing parlance, “move on.” It is barely two weeks since the Supreme Court handed the presidency to Bush, yet the news outlets and the political leaders of both parties would have the public believe that nothing of great import has occurred.

In his concession speech Gore anticipated the general response of the ruling elite to this unprecedented act of political usurpation, whitewashing the court's attack on popular sovereignty with invocations of “the rule of law.”

It is remarkable how quickly the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and all of the other organs of liberal opinion have accommodated themselves to the installation of a president by overtly anti-democratic means. The *Post* editorialized on December 17: “Our general view is that democracy is not just a matter of divining voters' intent but of developing and sticking by a set of rules to measure that intent; and that Vice President Gore had a fair shot within those rules to prove he'd won, and didn't manage to do so.”

Not *just* a matter of voter intent, the *Post* writes, summing up in a nutshell its contempt for democratic principles. More important, this organ of the Washington establishment declares, is the “set of rules” established to determine that intent. Here the *Post* advances a formula perfectly acceptable to all sorts of authoritarian regimes. Dictatorships past and present have concocted various “rules” and formalities—from plebiscites, to rigged elections, to shadow parliaments—to give their repressive rule a democratic gloss.

What distinguishes a democratic political system from an authoritarian one—bearing in mind that democracy is always stunted and circumscribed in a class society dominated by a privileged economic elite—is an earnest effort to formulate electoral rules and procedures in such a way as to accurately reflect the intent of the voters. The very language used by the *Post* shows that it is indifferent to such considerations. This in itself is a measure of how far the American establishment has departed from a serious commitment to democratic principles.

The implication is clear: the substance of popular rule is of little import; what counts is the stability of the political system and the pretence of democratic process. (Even by this standard, the Supreme Court's intervention—carried out by unelected and partisan judges, on the basis of legal sophistries—is a travesty of democracy.)

In a similar vein, the *New York Times* carried an

© World Socialist Web Site

editorial post-mortem on December 27. This piece proceeded from the premise that it was time to put aside charges that the election had been stolen and move on to the task of fixing the flaws in the process of casting and counting votes. “By delaying their efforts and lawsuits until after a president-elect was chosen, the NAACP and civil rights leaders have made it clear that their struggle is not about electing George W. Bush or Al Gore. It is about electoral fairness,” the *Times* wrote.

Here blindness merges with deceit. The notion that a historic breach of democratic norms can be addressed primarily as a technical question, and requires no serious examination of underlying social and political processes, bespeaks a liberal establishment that is devoid of either conviction or principle, and fears nothing more than an honest appraisal of the state of American democratic institutions.

Time magazine went even further, naming Bush its “person of the year” and lauding this political and intellectual cipher in a multi-page display of journalistic pandering.

The US ruling elite may be eager to dismiss the events of recent weeks, but they cannot so easily be put aside. The resolution of the 2000 election by judicial dictate marks a watershed in US history and a turning point in international politics. Nothing will ever be the same. A protracted process of social polarization and political decay has produced a definitive rupture with democratic processes that can only signify the emergence of immense social and political upheavals.

The unseemly haste with which the entire political establishment is rushing to put the election crisis behind it testifies to the fragility of the political system and the depth of the crisis of American society. In the end, the impasse revealed the lack of any significant constituency within the ruling elite for a democratic adjudication of the presidential election. The defense of democratic rights, which will increasingly become a mass question in America, falls directly to the tens of millions of working people who have for so long been effectively excluded from the political process, monopolized as it is by two parties controlled by the corporate and financial oligarchy.

Among these millions there are many who will not so easily forget the experience of the 2000 election. Before long they will be drawn into struggles to defend their jobs, living standards and basic rights against a government which they deeply and rightly feel to be illegitimate. The Socialist Equality Party and its organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*, will strive to articulate and raise to the level of a democratic and socialist political program the aspirations and needs of these working masses.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site