

Europe's right-wing media gloats, while liberals fear discrediting of US democracy following Supreme Court verdict

Chris Marsden
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There is a growing recognition within Europe's media that what they often glibly, and indeed smugly, dismissed as America's "election farce" has serious political import. The Republican political coup has been hailed by the rightwing as a triumph. More liberal commentators, in contrast, have sounded ominous warnings of the political implications of such a naked attack on democratic rights.

Britain's *Sun* newspaper, published by Rupert Murdoch, was the most unabashed in hailing the US Supreme Court verdict enabling George W Bush to steal the presidential election. Having a Republican administration in the US signalled that, "The world's political swingometer has swung to the right." For this reason, "It doesn't matter that Bush only just won" [one might add... or indeed how]. "In the words of that great friend of America, Margaret Thatcher: 'REJOICE! REJOICE!'" ... "The good guys, ladies and gentlemen, are back in charge."

The house organ of Britain's Conservative Party, the *Telegraph*, was equally triumphal. Bush is compared with Clinton in order to illustrate the dawn of a new era of right wing reaction: "Unlike Bill Clinton, he speaks for the often overlooked half of the 'Baby Boomer' generation that does not shirk traditional values. As a graduate of the Yale class of 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, he observed large tracts of the future American elite turning from pro-Americanism to self-hatred—and did not like what he saw."

This will have its impact domestically in a turn to repressive law and order measures guided by the Supreme Court's "most brilliant member, Antonin Scalia". Most importantly for the *Telegraph*, US Foreign policy will be hardline and militaristic. "Mr Clinton's 'culture of therapy'—of talking things over with the delinquents of the world—has emboldened tyrants from Baghdad to Pyongyang," the editorial asserts. "After eight years of

uncertain trumpets, all true Atlanticists can look forward to some real leadership in the White House, rather than the nervous multilateralism of a man who was profoundly ambiguous about the use of American power."

This, the *Telegraph* believes, will put the European powers firmly in their place and show the pro-European Labour Party the error of its ways: "For this country, the costs of jumping the wrong way could be very heavy indeed, even to the extent that the 'special relationship' in intelligence might be jeopardised.

"There are certainly particular pockets of discontent who will find it hard to accept this result," the newspaper complains, "notably in black America." But this is due simply to a "cult of victimhood" that "could well poison political discourse well beyond the confines of the inner city ghettos."

The *Telegraph* advises against compromise in favour of whipping up a racist backlash in the prosperous suburbs, arguing, "there is little that Mr Bush can do about it without debasing himself—and he may even derive some strength in Middle America from such recriminations."

In face of such gloating by the political right, several newspapers have insisted that the whole affair is a storm in a teacup. Germany's *Die Zeit*, co-edited by ex Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, blithely proclaims that, "America's constitutional system is holding up... The people see it in the same way". The conservative *Die Welt* predicts "a readiness to compromise by the two parties, and of "healing the wounds" because Bush has "no other choice".

Other journals are far less sanguine. Several newspapers internationally have warned that the successful campaign by the Republicans to subvert the election has done far-reaching damage to the political stability of the US and the authority of its constitutional arrangements.

France's *Le Monde* states that the Supreme Court halting Florida's recount "asserted the primacy of procedure, the electoral timetable, over principle: one vote, one voice". Earlier, the December edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique* commented, "The new president will enter the White House with an authority as disputed as the result of the vote of 7 November... The likely compromise between the two parties (which have no fundamental differences between them) will not stop the institutional model of the US being gravely tarnished by the electoral and legal chaos in Florida."

Britain's pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* says the Supreme Court, "did not uphold the law. They chose to ignore justice and back their party's candidate. What an example to set. Don't let America now come preaching to the rest of the world about rights and wrongs, about justice and injustice. Their legal and political systems have behaved no more honourably than those of a banana republic." After "A shameful day for US democracy", Bush's presidency, "is so tainted before it begins that America faces becoming the world's laughing stock over the next four years."

The liberal *Guardian* says of the Supreme Court, "By its action, the antithesis of jurisprudence, the court is in contempt of the electorate. It may not, in this generation's lifetime, recover its reputation. And American political discourse may never be the same again."

Expanding on this theme, the editorial warns that the Republican election fix "leaves in its wake shockingly unfamiliar but very real doubts about the fundamental fairness and honesty of American democracy. In that broad sense, this election was truly a shattering event."

The *Guardian*'s political editor Hugo Young warns in similar fashion, that, "The easy thing to say is that all is well. Baritone America sends out oak-smoked voices of reassurance. Embassies tell us the system has emerged triumphant. The result will hold, the people will support it, the country will unite, democracy is secured. The US, we're told, is bigger than any of the puzzles that could not be resolved in the last five weeks. Now the definitive answer is declared. There's no meltdown in the markets, no army in the streets. Election 2000 was just a blip on history's screen."

"I'm afraid this is not true. The election has been a calamity without precedent. Its result is unacceptable, will not be accepted by large numbers of Americans... Democracy, quite simply, was poisoned to put George W Bush in the White House."

The liberal German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* states

that the US is still "deeply split" and "the tense political climate could explode." It continues, "for ten years, the gulf between the camps has been growing... the moderate centre of the country is being taken hostage by the whip hands of the ideological extremes in the USA. Beside the ideologists on the right, the judiciary has taken possession of politics."

"The unholy trend found its provisional high point in the impeachment proceedings against President Clinton, when parliament and the highest court united in the impeachment process. Now for the second time, the highest court is drawn into the 'thicket of politics', against which that legendary judge Felix Frankfurter warned fifty years ago."

"The judges ignored the fact completely that there is a second principle in a democracy: Each vote counts... A not inconsiderable group in the American public will now understand that even the highest court is part of a brutal party machine, which for a long time determines the rules in parliament and government..."

Maurizio Blondet, writing in the Italian Catholic daily *Avvenire*, quotes dissenting Supreme Court Justice John Stevens' statement that "the faith of the nation in the judiciary as the impartial guardians of the law" has been undermined. Blondet calls these, "Words of stone, terrible in the mouth of a supreme magistrate. Resembling in expression what the USA has heard only in tragic moments of their history—the civil war. And this is alarming. A sign that the constitutional wound is deeper than many think and cuts literally the American heart. It cracks the fundamental faith of the public in 'their' institutions."



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