

Wall Street Journal targets Jesse Jackson: opening salvo in an attack on public dissent

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Within the establishment press the *Wall Street Journal* serves as a mouthpiece for the most right-wing elements of the Republican Party and American ruling circles in general. Thus the appearance of an editorial in the *Journal's* December 14 issue denouncing Jesse Jackson in scathing terms is indicative of the political trajectory of forces that will exert a major influence on the incoming administration of George W. Bush.

The *Journal's* editors were the point men for the assault against the Clinton administration that began even before the Democratic president took office in January of 1993. The newspaper's editorial pages promoted all of the scandals concocted by the Christian Right and other anti-Clinton zealots. These included Whitewater, Filegate, Travelgate, allegations of campaign finance abuse and the trading of military secrets to China, as well as the series of sex scandals involving Gennifer Flowers, Juanita Broaddrick, Paula Jones and Kathleen Willey, culminating in the Monica Lewinsky affair and the Clinton impeachment.

The newspaper's modus operandi was to demonize individuals within the Clinton administration and its periphery, utilizing gossip and innuendo as weapons of character assassination. One of the first victims was White House deputy counsel and longtime Clinton associate Vincent Foster, who was driven to suicide in July 1993, in part because of the campaign waged against him by the *Journal*. (Subsequently the *Journal* editorial pages campaigned for a full-scale investigation of the Foster suicide, giving implicit support to allegations from Christian fundamentalist groups and other ultra-rightists that Foster was the victim of a plot hatched by Clinton to cover his tracks in the Whitewater affair.)

The *Wall Street Journal's* attack on Jesse Jackson in the aftermath of the Supreme Court decision handing the presidency to Bush must be considered within the context of the newspaper's record of dirty tricks and political provocation against its liberal opponents.

The editorial, which appeared two days after the December 12 high court ruling, featured a head shot of Jackson and bore the headline "The Mouth that Roared." It denounced Jackson for criticizing actions by Florida Republican officials that effectively excluded thousands of minority voters, including the use of confusing ballots, acts of police intimidation, and the exclusion of legal voters from voter registration lists. It further attacked Jackson for his denunciations of post-election efforts by the Bush camp and its allies in Florida, including George W.'s brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, to block an accurate count of the votes, culminating in the decision by the US Supreme Court to override the state high court and halt manual recounts of untallied votes, thereby handing the election to George W. Bush.

The *Wall Street Journal* condemned Jackson as a rabble-rouser and

"race-baiter" for expressing, even in a limited way, the outrage felt not only by African-American voters in Florida, but by tens of millions of people around the country over the theft of the election. The implication of the editorial was that any protest against the breach of democratic rights at the center of the 2000 election was illegitimate.

The piece began with a quote from former Washington, DC Mayor Marion Barry—"Jesse don't wanna run nothing but his mouth"—to which the *Journal* editors added, "And run his mouth he certainly has." They continued: "In the last week, the Reverend Jackson has jumped from metaphor to metaphor, here inveighing against George W. Bush's 'Nazi tactics,' there suggesting that the protesters outside the Supreme Court were reminiscent of Selma, where civil rights workers were beaten by authorities."

The editors inveighed against Jackson's comparison of the December 12 Supreme Court ruling with the infamous Dred Scott decision of 1857, in which the high court proclaimed the right of Southern slave owners to take their human "property" anywhere in the US. The editorial went on to denounce Jackson for warning that a "civil rights explosion" would erupt if Bush were installed in the White House by undemocratic means. It concluded with the demand that "honest" Democrats "find the guts to stand up to" and "renounce the vicious race-baiting of the Jesse Jacksons."

These sentiments were echoed by various right-wing publications and columnists. Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* ran a December 14 column headlined "Old Has-Been Jesse Keeps Spewing Bile." Another piece, entitled "Jesse Jackson's Long Misguided March," appeared in the December 14 online edition of *Reason* magazine. The author, Michael Lynch, accused Jackson of raising "incendiary stuff" to continue "his quest to divide America." Similar pieces suggesting that Jackson should be silenced appeared in Rev. Moon's *Washington Times* and other right-wing publications.

In the tone and language of these columns, as well as their substance, there is more than a whiff of McCarthyism. They are all the more significant given the fact that their target is a political figure who has long been part of the bourgeois establishment. The effort to cast Jackson as some kind of left extremist only testifies to how far to the right the spectrum of official politics has swung in the US. Even by current European standards, a man with Jackson's public views would be considered a centrist in France or Germany.

Indeed, Jackson's rise to prominence has reflected the general decline and movement to the right of the civil rights establishment. A defender of the profit system and advocate of "black capitalism," Jackson has functioned on numerous occasions as an emissary of the State Department. His main role at home has been to intervene in various "hot spots," involving labor disputes or attacks on racial

minorities, to channel discontent in a harmless direction and keep opposition within the framework of the Democratic Party.

That the right wing now goes after Jackson in such a frenzied manner is a reflection of their own nervousness over the anger felt by broad masses of working people in the aftermath of the election. The Republican right is well aware that its social agenda—tax cuts for the rich, school vouchers, attacks on Medicare and Social Security, the removal of all restraints on big business—is deeply unpopular with the majority of the American people. It senses as well the widespread discontent over the anti-democratic way in which Bush has been brought to power—discontent that can only be compounded by the impact of the economic downturn already under way.

The inclination of the forces lined up behind Bush, for whom the *Wall Street Journal* speaks, is to strike hard and fast to preempt a growth of social and political opposition. Their targeting of Jackson is part of a wider effort to create an atmosphere of intimidation to silence all resistance to Bush and his policies.

Already sections of the media are slanting their reports of demonstrations planned for the week of Bush's inauguration to portray them in advance as illegitimate, if not illegal, acts of political sabotage. A number of organizations have announced plans to protest Bush's inauguration on January 20, and Jackson himself has called for nonviolent protests beginning on January 15 (Martin Luther King Day) and leading up to Inauguration Day.

One Reuters dispatch on the planned protests was headlined, "Leftists to Disrupt Inauguration." It quoted the Washington, DC police chief saying that his department was gearing up for a clash with demonstrators.

This effort to de-legitimize dissent was evident throughout the post-election crisis. Pro-Bush forces targeted Jackson for organizing protests in West Palm Beach, Florida of black, Jewish and immigrant voters who complained of confusing ballots and other irregularities. At the time, Bill O'Reilly of Fox News said, "I don't want Jesse Jackson stirring up racial tensions and class warfare."

On November 13, more than 100 Republican protesters, waving signs and shouting "Jesse go home" from bullhorns, forced Jackson to leave the stage at a rally of nearly 2,000 West Palm Beach demonstrators. Police, who whisked Jackson and other speakers away to a nearby auditorium, declared the situation too dangerous for Jackson to remain.

In contrast to the generally negative media coverage of Jackson and anti-Bush protests in Florida, most media outlets treated the November 22 mini-riot organized by the Bush camp to stop the recounting of ballots in Miami-Dade County as a spontaneous expression of legitimate dissent.

What, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, is Jesse Jackson's crime? First, that he is exercising his constitutional right to engage in political dissent. And second, that he is, to the extent that he speaks bluntly about the events of the past seven weeks, revealing aspects of the profound attack on the democratic rights of the American people that is under way.

Indeed, Jackson's characterization of the Supreme Court ruling as a "coup d'etat" and his invocation of the Dred Scott case stand out as notable and meritorious exceptions in a political career marked by political obfuscation and double-talk.

The comparison to the Dred Scott decision is, notwithstanding many historical differences, an apt one. The ruling of 1857 attacked the democratic foundations of the American republic by sanctioning the expansion of slavery throughout the US, an action that made almost

inevitable the outbreak of the Civil War four years later. The 5-4 ruling by the high court on December 12 of this year was, in a basic sense, no less reactionary, and it heralds social and political convulsions not seen in the US since the Civil War. It represented a fundamental breach with democratic norms and the principle of popular sovereignty. In fact, the justification advanced openly by the right-wing troika of William Rehnquist, Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas was the assertion that the American people do not have a constitutional right to elect the president.

In making the statements so deplored by the *Wall Street Journal*, Jackson was no doubt responding to the pressure he feels from broad sections of workers, particularly African-Americans, who turned out in large numbers on Election Day to prevent Bush from capturing the White House, rightly sensing the threat that his administration would pose to their past gains, including those won in the civil rights struggles.

Jackson is fully conscious of the forces he ultimately represents and the class interests he serves. That is why he responded to the *Wall Street Journal* editorial on the very day it appeared by phoning Bush to congratulate him and offer his services to "unite and heal the nation."

"I told him that he will have my support," Jackson told the press. "Hopefully, we'll get together soon and discuss ways he can build bridges with minorities who are outraged over the way the election ended." Jackson reiterated his conciliatory remarks in appearances on the Sunday news shows and NBC's *Today* program the following day.

Jackson's public contrition was entirely predictable. But it is not a matter of giving political support to Jackson. Neither he nor any other representative of the Democratic Party is capable of mounting a serious struggle against the right wing.

What is critical, however, is that working people and all those committed to the defense of democratic rights grasp the essence of the attack on Jackson by the *Wall Street Journal* and the Republican right. While the immediate object of the attack may be Jackson and other liberals, more fundamentally the target is the working class. The campaign against Jackson should be taken as a warning that the coming to power of the Bush administration will signify an intensification of the assault on basic rights.



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