

The US media: a critical component of the conspiracy against democratic rights—Part 7

Conclusions about the media in general, the liberal press in particular

David Walsh
13 January 2001

[Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#) | [Part 4](#) | [Part 5](#) | [Part 6](#) | [Part 7](#)

This is the final part in a series of articles on the ideological and political role of the American media.

We have attempted in this series of articles to outline briefly, but concretely, the role played by the mass media in the US during the election crisis of 2000, as well as to delineate their more general social characteristics. Without claiming to have made any astonishingly original discoveries, we hope that the attentive reader will agree with the perspective indicated in the title of the series, that the principal media outlets functioned collectively in the recent events as a critical component of the conspiracy against democratic rights. Numerous readers have already responded along these lines.

There is no prominent television personality or newspaper columnist who can honestly claim that he or she strained every intellectual nerve from the evening of November 7 onward to warn the population about the efforts of George W. Bush's camp to seize—in a fashion without precedent in the modern age—the office of the president. On the contrary, the vast majority of commentators displayed either active hostility, cynicism or indifference toward the effort to obtain an accurate count of the Florida vote. These attitudes played no small part in the ability of the Republican right to place its figurehead in the White House. Had a single leading figure on a major television network, for example, shown the same zeal in exposing the Bush usurpation plan that so many media personalities demonstrated in bringing to light salacious details during the impeachment drive of 1998-99, the ability of the Republicans to block the recounting of votes would have been made far more difficult. Yet there was not one consistently honorable media voice “crying in the wilderness” during the five week-long crisis.

This is a black mark against the American media that will not easily be washed away. The complicity of the television networks and daily newspapers, whatever the degree of immediate public perception of their perfidy, in the installation of a government against the democratically expressed will of the people must have the effect of driving the leading media personalities farther into the embrace of reactionary political elements. At one level or another, the various pundits will have to accept responsibility for and defend the policies and actions of the regime they have helped assume power.

The openly right-wing elements in the media have no qualms about this embrace. They welcomed the Republicans' grab for power and all that it meant, as a blow against the efforts of the more oppressed layers of the population to register their votes and have them counted. Right-wing media types are increasingly unafraid to express anti-democratic sentiment and vent their anger against concerns for basic rights. This is

veteran syndicated newspaper columnist Georgie Anne Geyer, for instance, in a November 24 piece on the Florida impasse:

“One of the most revealing catchphrases of the Florida experience, by which you can quickly tell which philosophy is speaking, is the ‘will of the people.’ It sounds nice, even innocent, but think not only of the American ‘representative government’ approval, with its checks and balances and its Electoral College, but also of the French Revolution, the failed American utopian experiments, Rousseau's noble savage, and the Marxist collectivist thought that has influenced our home-grown political correctness.

“When the Democrats talk about the ‘will of the people’ in [Florida's] Broward and Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties, they are really talking about an emotionally expressed and amorphous ‘will’ that emerges out of some floating collective consciousness.”

To associate Democratic Party officials, who did everything in their power to demobilize the population in the face of continual and brazen Republican provocation, with Rousseau, the French Revolution and Marxism is, of course, delusional, but Geyer is not off the mark in instinctively sensing the threat represented by the struggle under contemporary conditions for democratic rights. The chasm of social inequality that has opened up in the US is proving, as Bush's anointment by five reactionary Supreme Court justices reveals, incompatible with democratic norms. Political life in the US must move in one of two directions: toward authoritarian rule, in which the ruling elite has complete sway over an oppressed and defenseless population, or toward decisive inroads into the wealth and power of this elite, a process that must inevitably take an anti-capitalist and socialist character.

Transformed economic and social circumstances in the US, behind which lie dramatic changes in the globalized world economy, in the final analysis, account for the part played by the media in the 2000 election. The media personalities, liberal and conservative alike, speak for a ruling elite increasingly remote from the mass of the American population, including many elements once considered middle class and “professional.”

Our analysis has indicated that television news anchors and senior analysts make millions—in some cases, taking into account their stock portfolios and other sources of income, probably tens of millions—of dollars a year. Wealth and privilege alone do not necessarily form an insuperable boundary against telling the truth. In the present case, however, we are considering individuals who have implicated and integrated themselves in the workings of what have become transnational media giants, with tentacles extended into dozens of countries and a variety of media.

The leading television personalities in particular operate in effect as the public faces of their respective firms. There is no room for independence, no margin for error. The highest stakes, financially and politically, are in play. These individuals have arrived at their lofty status in the media by demonstrating their unswerving loyalty to the conglomerates who employ them and with whom they fully identify. Maintaining their positions *requires* them unflinchingly to lie about social reality in the US, to conceal the extent of corporate influence over every sphere of life and to deny, above all, the glaring social divide which their wealth and rank only underscore.

The liberal press and the end of the election crisis

The liberal press did not function in the post-election events in an identical manner to the television networks or the stridently right-wing editorial columns of the *Wall Street Journal*, Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* and the like. Concern was raised in the editorial and opinion pages of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe* and other publications about the course of events.

The majority of the liberal opinion makers made clear that their principal worry was that the Republican theft of the election would undermine "faith in the system" and, thereby, although *this* was not stated openly, tear off the democratic mask that conceals class rule in America. A minority—and we now genuinely are speaking of a handful—expressed fear for the fate of democracy when the votes of tens of thousands are treated like so much scrap paper. In any event, there was no crusade launched by any of these publications against the Bush camp's extra-constitutional operations. While the Republican attack dogs were unleashed everywhere, liberal and erstwhile liberal commentators passively looked on and tut-tutted. They proved themselves incapable, despite their considerable resources and large readerships, of lifting a finger to protect the rights of the majority of voters who had opposed Bush.

And when the December 12 Supreme Court decision predictably favored Bush and when Gore and the Democrats the following day, equally predictably, capitulated with barely a whimper, the liberal press too folded its tent.

The liberal editors surrendered quietly, and almost uniformly. Their pieces might as well have been penned by one shallow and unprincipled hand. They contained no mention of the thousands of votes in Palm Beach County that went to the wrong candidate, or the suppression of tens of thousands of black votes, or the outrageous intervention of the Florida state Republican apparatus—run by Bush's brother—to rig the process, or the Republican riot in Miami that halted the hand recount in that county, or the venomous attacks on the Florida state Supreme Court merely for upholding the right to vote, or the argument of justices Scalia, Rehnquist and Thomas that the right to suffrage is not constitutionally protected—none of this was now worthy of a comment.

All of the following editorial opinions appeared December 14.

The *New York Times*: "In an unusually gracious exchange of televised speeches, the president-elect, George W. Bush, and Vice-President Al Gore moved last night to unify the nation and heal the wounds of their bitter struggle for the White House.... Mr. Bush's address to an applauding audience in the Texas House of Representatives chamber offered a hopeful note of conciliation that has been missing in the last five weeks.... We believe that the vast majority of Americans are ready to be led by Mr. Bush.... Mr. Bush needs to proceed quickly to assemble a cabinet that looks like the American family he invoked in his campaign and at his convention. We think the nation will be willing to grant him great flexibility in doing so, provided it sees steady effort, good will and the kind of humility that ought to be stirred by the circumstances of his victory.... Despite the bitterness of the last five weeks, and indeed the last year, Americans are ready to turn the page. George Walker Bush, a man who said he wanted a challenge, must lead the way."

Washington Post: "The remarks of both men were gracious. The tradition of reconciliation after even bitterly fought elections remains strong, and in invoking it, both men offered welcome relief from the scorched-earth tactics and rhetoric of the last five weeks. They also sent the right message to their followers. To wrest the White House away from the party in power in a period of peace, prosperity and relative social contentment is a major political accomplishment, no matter how narrow the victory and exceptional circumstances.... Mr. Bush achieved his narrow victory in part by putting a softer face on his party—by his promise to be a uniter. It's a promise that will now be heavily tested.... There is no asterisk after his powers; he is duly the president-elect. We congratulate him on the victory. Time now to turn to the question of how he uses it."

The *Los Angeles Times*: "In the great tradition of postelection reconciliation, first Al Gore and then Bush spoke to the nation last night, calling for an end to the rancor of the presidential campaign and its extended aftermath and asking the American people to come together for the common good.... The United States resolved this serious political dispute in a peaceful way, Bush reminded, still 'one nation, indivisible.' It was, all in all, a gracious coda to a campaign most Americans are relieved to see finally end."

The *Boston Globe*: "Two presidential antagonists last night tried to provide some ballast to a destabilized nation, with Vice President Al Gore conceding and George W. Bush acknowledging the hurt many Americans feel about both the process and the outcome of Election 2000.... Bush was wise during the campaign to keep his distance from the more extreme elements of his party, and his motivation should be even stronger now. He should beware the cajolery of [Rep. Tom] Delay or Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi and put flesh on the rhetorical bones of his reputation as 'a uniter not a divider.'... The great existential truth is that we may never know who won the 2000 presidential election. But all available arbiters have now done their work, and Americans do know—and must accept—who will be president."

The *Miami Herald*: "[I]n a brief and eloquent speech, Mr. Gore showed only graciousness, generosity and unalloyed patriotism.... His grace in defeat, his words of support for President-elect George W. Bush, and his refusal to either personally or through backers criticize the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling were important steps along the path to national reconciliation.... To outsiders, these past five weeks may have seemed messy and convoluted, even undemocratic. But the institutions so revered by this nation held rock solid. Power again will be transferred from a leader of one party to the leader of another—and the nation will unify behind him. That's the American way."

The *Detroit Free Press*: "In his brief speech Wednesday night, Gore was composed yet passionate in appealing to the nation to unite behind its new leader. He made no apologies for dragging out the counts and recounts. And he stopped short of complaining about unfair rules or biased judges or partisan Florida officials. No allusion to defeat snatched by lawyers from the jaws of victory. The immediate national interest has to be in looking forward.... Gore will be afforded plenty of opportunities to second-guess Bush as the president-elect pilots the ship of state through the Potomac's roiling waters. But for now, Gore, while resigned to defeat, appears ready to step back and let the Bush administration get under way. He may surely believe it should be a Gore administration. But it's over. That's what his speech should help the American people believe and accept."

The editorial writers are intelligent people; they know what everybody knows, that the election was stolen by the Republican Party—indeed if one reads between the lines, some of the editorials hint at this elementary fact. Yet this extraordinary violation of democracy, one of the most egregious in American history—with all that it portends about a government that comes to power in such a manner—cannot move them to make so much as a serious protest. And all the talk about Bush the "uniter" and the "softer

face” of the Republican Party has been exposed as nonsense even before the former Texas governor takes office. His proposed cabinet looks like any “American family” that happens to be full of militarists, corporate executives and right-wingers. The nomination of John Ashcroft—a Christian fanatic and racist—for the post of attorney general alone gives the lie to all the promises of “compassionate conservatism.”

The refusal of the liberal editorialists to state the simple truth—that the Bush regime hasn’t the slightest legitimacy and has been imposed on the American people through political conspiracy and that the Democrats in Congress, if they had any principle, would block every one of its nominations and policies—is not simply the product of cowardice and opportunism, although those unpleasant traits play a role. Liberalism is in a sorry state for social, historical and moral reasons. Most of those who might once have protested are now wealthy, part of the establishment, more concerned about the health of the stock market than the state of democratic rights. Intellectual and spiritual decay have accompanied financial success. More generally, the demands of the capitalist market have proven incompatible, in the long run, with the program of social reformism, particularly as the latter has been diluted and its proponents drained of energy and determination both by the growth of social antagonisms in the US and the obligations imposed on the American ruling elite by its role as the pre-eminent imperialist power.

Contemporary liberal politicians and editorialists are for justice and equality for everyone and resolutely opposed to the ultra-right—as long as it doesn’t require them to work up a sweat. In income, lifestyle and outlook they are much closer to Bush, Trent Lott and Tom Delay than they are to the working class and middle class voters of Florida who were deprived of their rights and who fear for their jobs, their pensions, their civil rights and their health.

In the final analysis, the liberal wing of the ruling elite fears the same social process as Geyer and company: the radicalization of wide layers of the population and their advancement of their own independent interests, above all, social equality. It fears this more than anything, including police-state dictatorship.

In *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky cited the comment of a Russian philosopher, who spoke more forthrightly than our present-day liberals—at least out loud: “Whatever we [liberals] stand for, we must not dream of uniting with the people—we must fear them more than all the persecutions of the government, and we must give thanks to the government which alone protects us with its prisons and bayonets from the ferocity of the people.” Voila!

In the 2000 election no section of the mass media in the US proved to be a champion of the ordinary voter. There were those in the media who cheered Bush on, while some simply looked the other way. The experience has shocked many people. We hope and trust that the shock and inevitable disgust and anger will impel them to think more deeply and critically about political life in America and worldwide than perhaps they have hitherto. This historic episode has also shown the need, we think persuasively, to resist and oppose the suffocating corporate monopoly over news reporting and analysis in the US. The *World Socialist Web Site* is not shy about advancing itself as an alternative. We believe our principled record in the recent events has earned us that right.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact