

Why did the US media black out the Civil Rights Commission report on the Florida vote?

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It would seem elementary that a report from a federal civil rights agency charging widespread voter disenfranchisement in the pivotal state of Florida during the 2000 US presidential election would be a major news item. Not so, according to the decision-makers at the US broadcast media and some of the most influential newspapers.

Twelve days ago the US Commission on Civil Rights issued the preliminary findings in its probe of the Florida election, declaring it had found evidence suggesting voting rights violations by state officials. The commission chairwoman, Mary Frances Berry, reported that, among other irregularities, state officials used an inaccurate database knowing that it would wrongly identify as convicted felons thousands of legal voters, who were then purged from the state's voter list. (See our report: US Commission on Civil Rights charges 'voter disenfranchisement... at heart' of Bush victory in Florida)

The commission's report did not name the "key officials" who it said were responsible. But from the evidence the commission presented, one could only conclude that President George W. Bush's brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, along with Secretary of State Katherine Harris and other Republican officials, intentionally acted to make certain that likely Democratic voters would face obstacles casting their ballots and having them counted. In particular, the commission pointed to the disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of working class and minority voters.

The commission released its politically explosive report at a press conference held on the morning of March 9 at its Washington, DC headquarters. The event was attended by reporters and photographers from the ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and Fox television networks, as well as from the Associated Press and several radio stations and newspapers.

Initially, the report was treated as a major story. The Associated Press had an article on the news wires shortly after the report was released, and CBS radio broadcast the commission's findings as its lead story at 11 a.m. After that, however, news of the report was virtually effaced from the media.

Cable News Network's *Headline News*, which purports to

present 24-hour coverage of the most important developments of the day, did not air a word about the Civil Rights Commission's findings. The television networks—ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox—followed suit, saying nothing about the report during their evening news broadcasts.

The story was either ignored or downplayed by the print media. On March 9, the day the report was to be released, the *New York Times* carried a small article, on page 14, which included one paragraph about the commission's charges of voter disenfranchisement.

The *Washington Post* was no less dismissive. On March 10 the *Post* published a four-paragraph article in its "Washington in Brief" column in the back pages of the edition. According to a media relations representative for the Civil Rights Commission, neither the *Times* nor the *Post* sent reporters to cover the release of the report, although, in the case of the *Post*, the newspaper's offices are only 11 city blocks from the commission's headquarters.

The rest of the US print media treated the release of the report as a non-event, with only about a dozen papers—half of them located in Florida—reporting it. *USA Today* ran a report on page 13 of its March 12 edition.

Given the substance of the commission's report, the *World Socialist Web Site* decided to contact the television networks to demand an explanation for their failure to inform the public of its release. CBS and NBC news spokespersons did not return our calls. In the case of CNN, we were transferred to an operator at the Atlanta-based station's "comment line," who said, "As far as the network is concerned, we are not obligated to give an explanation as to what news is on the air."

The WWS did get through to an executive at ABC News headquarters in New York City, who asked that he not be named. At first he sought to justify the network's decision by saying the report was only a preliminary summary of the commission's findings. Apparently, he wasn't even certain that this was the case. "That's your understanding, isn't it?" he asked the WWS reporter.

After the WWS reporter outlined the substantive character of the Civil Rights Commission's findings, the ABC News

executive insisted that his network had provided ample coverage about charges of discrimination against minority voters.

The following exchange ensued:

WSWS: Tell me, how does this process work? You had reporters there. A document was released from a federal agency. You had an editorial board meeting. How did you decide this should not be presented to the American public?

ABC: Actually we don't discuss our internal editorial discussions, so I'm not about to start doing it with you.

WSWS: You mean there are no objective criteria involved?

ABC: The objective criterion is whether something is newsworthy, whether it makes news.

WSWS: So this wasn't newsworthy?

ABC: Well, because it's my understanding that ... I'm not saying that at all, and if you quote me saying that, you will be incorrect. What I'm saying is this was a preliminary report, there is a more extensive report to come out, and I guess they made the judgment that when the more extensive, fuller report was ready, that is what they would use as the news hook.

WSWS: But a preliminary report that listed at least 10 items—police roadblocks, the fact that officials did not provide resources to precincts, that legal voters were knowingly purged from the registration rolls—in which they said explicitly that disenfranchisement was at the heart of the Florida elections—this wasn't news? Isn't it the case that the networks don't want to present anything that challenges the legitimacy of the Bush administration?

ABC: Before you make a charge as serious as the one you just made, you need to watch our programs. If you've watched our programs, you would know that we reported for 36 days about the elections.

WSWS: Yes, but in the aftermath of the inauguration...

ABC: This conversation is coming to a very quick close.

The WSWS reporter then informed the ABC executive that the WSWS was preparing an article about why the news media suppressed the Civil Rights Commission's findings. He responded by saying we had better be careful before charging “some sort of conspiracy to withhold this information from the American people.”

In fact, it is not necessary to assume the existence of a conspiracy between the networks and the rest of the media to suppress the Civil Rights Commission's report. Closed door meetings and secret phone calls would not have been required for all of them to reach the same decision, since they all share a similar political bias and a general disdain for the democratic rights of the American people. (Nor would it be correct to rule out, a priori, the possibility of collusion between the network and media moguls.)

The media played a consistently cynical and reactionary role during the 2000 election crisis and beyond. For the five weeks when the presidential election hung in the balance, the media systematically downplayed the fundamental issue at the center

of the conflict: the right to vote and have one's vote counted. News coverage was generally slanted, avoiding criticism of the Bush camp for blocking the counting of votes, while placing the onus on Democratic candidate Al Gore, who, it was suggested, unreasonably and unnecessarily prolonged the political crisis by refusing to concede the election.

In the aftermath of Bush's inauguration the media has gone out of its way to promote the Republican president, refusing at press conferences or other forums to raise any questions relating to the anti-democratic manner in which he obtained the presidency, or the fact that he won fewer popular votes nationally than his Democratic rival.

In this regard, the final exchange between the WSWS and the ABC News executive was enlightening:

ABC: You had three separate news organizations, making three separate editorial judgments on a particular story, all of which happen to come to the same conclusion: that it doesn't rise to the level of the evening newscast on that particular day. What does that tell you?

WSWS: It tells me that the networks all lack any real concern for basic democratic rights. Popular sovereignty was violated. People's votes were suppressed and it took place in Florida, a state run by Bush's brother—but for the media, that's not news.

ABC: Let me ask you a question. Are you a journalist or are you an advocate?

WSWS: I'm an advocate of democratic rights, which journalists are supposed to be. I'm not a political supporter of Gore, far from it. I'm a socialist. But when it comes to clear violations of democratic rights, I think it is the responsibility of any halfway decent journalist, any one with an ounce of integrity, to report it. This was not just any organization. This was the US Commission of Civil Rights, which charged that likely violations of the Voting Rights Act took place and documented it after 30 hours of testimony. It was decided by the major news networks not to report it. Now, that is advocacy. Your advocacy is expressed in not allowing the American public to hear news stories that challenge the legitimacy of the Bush administration.



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