

New York Times documents military role in theft of 2000 election

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In an extensive report published July 15, the *New York Times* shed new light on the methods employed by the Bush campaign to hijack the 2000 presidential election. The report, entitled “How Bush Took Florida: Mining the Overseas Absentee Vote,” was the product of a six-month investigation by the *Times* into Florida officials’ handling of ballots mailed from outside the US. These overseas votes became a focal point in the struggle between Bush and Democratic candidate Al Gore over the disputed Florida election.

The *Times* described how the Bush campaign waged a combined legal and propaganda offensive to pressure canvassing boards in Republican strongholds to accept overseas ballots that, under Florida election laws, were illegal and should have been rejected. At the same time, Bush lawyers pressed canvassing boards in Democratic counties to reject overseas ballots with identical flaws.

This effort to illegally increase Bush’s vote centered on hundreds of ballots from military personnel stationed overseas. The Republicans enlisted the aid of the military brass to increase the number of military ballots. They also pressed local election boards to validate military ballots that lacked postmarks, bore postmarks later than the November 7 Election Day, or failed to meet other legal requirements.

As a result, 680 of the 2,490 overseas ballots that were counted as legal votes after Election Day—more than one out of every four such ballots—were defective. Of these, 288 were ballots that canvassing boards initially rejected on November 17, the deadline for receiving overseas ballots, but subsequently accepted under pressure from the Bush campaign, the military and the media.

Bush’s official margin of victory in Florida was 537 votes. Citing the Florida Department of State’s web site, the *Times* reports that without the overseas ballots counted after election day, Gore would have won Florida, and thus the White House, by 202 votes.

The Bush campaign and Florida officials, headed by Governor Jeb Bush, the brother of the Republican candidate, engineered this systematic violation of Florida election laws at the same time that they were declaring any delay in the statutory date for certifying the Florida vote to be impermissible, on the grounds that election laws had to be strictly enforced.

The flagrantly unequal treatment of overseas ballots flew in the face of the other major contention of the Republicans, namely, that the lack of specific and uniform criteria for judging disputed ballots in different counties violated the equal protection clause of the US Constitution. This novel idea, if consistently applied, would invalidate elections at every level in the United States, where election laws differ from state to state and rules and procedures vary from county to county across the country. Nevertheless, it was ultimately seized on by the right-wing Republican majority on the US Supreme Court, which

based its 5-4 ruling halting manual recounts and handing the presidency to Bush on this supposed violation of the equal protection principle.

Even as the *Times* presented its account of fraud and criminality on a massive scale, it sought to lend a veneer of legitimacy to the election. The article stated, without explanation, that the *Times* found “no evidence of vote fraud by either party.” It went on to say that its investigation “found no support for the suspicions of Democrats that the Bush campaign had organized an effort to solicit late votes.” At a later point the article declared, “There is no evidence that the Pentagon knowingly delivered ballots cast illegally after Election Day.”

The authors further cited an authority on voting patterns who estimated that Bush would have retained a margin of 245 votes even if the flawed overseas ballots had been discarded.

But the facts presented by the *Times*’ account contradict these conclusions. For example, the article noted that 17 percent of military overseas ballots from Florida voters arrived without postmarks, despite military regulations that require all mail to be postmarked. This extraordinary rate of unmarked mail stood in sharp contrast to the rest of the country, where less than 1 percent of all overseas military mail arrived without a postmark during the election period.

The *Times* reported that Pentagon officials it interviewed “could not fully explain why so many ballots were arriving without postmarks.” One obvious explanation, however, is that there was a concerted effort to solicit late votes from military personnel and ship them without postmarks so as to conceal the fact that they were illegal.

Two political issues emerge most starkly from the *Times*’ report. The first is the role played by the military in fixing the election.

The involvement of the military brass in the Florida impasse assumed a public form after Friday, November 17. On that day two critical events occurred. County canvassing boards in Florida rejected nearly a third of the overseas ballots received after Election Day, including hundreds of ballots from military personnel. Even though the certified total of overseas ballots increased Bush’s official margin by hundreds of votes, it failed to give the Bush campaign the cushion it deemed necessary to overcome the additional votes expected to go to the Gore camp if Republican attempts to halt hand recounts in south Florida failed.

Even more ominous for the Republicans, the Florida Supreme Court enjoined Secretary of State Harris from carrying out her plan to preempt the manual recounts and certify Bush the winner in Florida on Saturday, November 18.

The response of the Bush campaign was to launch a witch-hunting attack on Gore, portraying the efforts of the Democrats to weed out

illegal military ballots as an anti-American attack on the armed forces. Montana Governor Marc Racicot, a leading spokesman for the Republican campaign, called a press conference on November 18 and declared, "...the vice president's lawyers have gone to war, in my judgment, against the men and women who serve in the armed forces."

Retired General Norman Schwarzkopf, the commander of US forces in the Persian Gulf War and a public supporter of Bush, was brought forward to denounce Gore for denying servicemen their right to vote. Schwarzkopf made a point of reminding military personnel that if Gore won in Florida, he would be their new commander in chief—a statement that could only be read as a thinly veiled incitement to insubordination.

In the ensuing days the Bush campaign conducted a two-pronged drive to force local election officials to validate military ballots they had rejected on November 17. On the legal front, they filed suit against 14 canvassing boards in Republican counties, charging individual canvassing board members with violating federal law by rejecting military ballots without postmarks or other legal requirements. These suits had no merit, and were all eventually dismissed. But they had the desired effect of intimidating recalcitrant canvassing boards.

On the propaganda front, Republicans at both the national and state level obtained, through the good graces of the military brass, the names and e-mail addresses of military personnel stationed abroad whose ballots had been rejected. They solicited statements from sailors and Navy pilots denouncing Gore and the Democrats, which were then fed to a compliant media. At the height of the furor, to cite one example, Katie Couric of the NBC "Today" program interviewed the wife of a Navy pilot who protested the disqualification of her husband's ballot.

The second critical issue highlighted by the *Times* articles is the impotence and cowardice of the Democratic Party, and, above all, its prostration before the military. Even with the presidency on the line, both the presidential and vice presidential candidates of the Democratic Party collapsed in the face of opposition from the military brass.

The *Times* provides an account of the appearance of the vice presidential candidate, Senator Joseph Lieberman, on NBC's "Meet the Press" program on Sunday, November 19, one day after the Republicans launched their witch-hunt over the military ballots. Even Democratic officials in Florida were shocked by Lieberman's capitulation before the Republicans and the Pentagon.

Lieberman refused to defend Democratic officials who were opposing the inclusion of illegal ballots. Instead he said he would give "the benefit of the doubt" to military ballots, and called on Florida election officials to "go back and take another look" at ballots that had been rejected two days before.

Presidential candidate Gore was no less prostrate before the military. He rejected the advice of campaign strategists who urged him to challenge the illegal ballots. The *Times* quotes Joe Sandler, who was the Democratic National Committee's general counsel, recalling how Gore explained his position:

"I can give you his exact words. 'If I won this thing by a handful of military ballots, I would be hounded by Republicans and the press every day of my presidency and it wouldn't be worth having.'"

Another Gore aide is quoting as saying, "Gore got very stuck on the notion that if he became president it was not in the national interest that he have a relationship characterized by his mistrust of the

military."

These are extraordinary statements. They amount to the acceptance of a military veto over the outcome of a national election and the occupant of the White House.

The subordination of the military to civilian rule is a cardinal principle of the US Constitution. The fact that this cornerstone of democracy has become so eroded is a stark indication of the decay of bourgeois democratic institutions in the US.

The *Times* report confirms the analysis of the 2000 election made by the *World Socialist Web Site*: it was a watershed event, marking a decisive break with the traditional forms of rule of American capitalism. The details revealed in the *Times* exposé underscore the enormous dangers facing the working class. Its basic rights are threatened by a political system moving inexorably in the direction of authoritarian rule.

The absence of any serious opposition within the political establishment to the right-wing attack on democratic rights is reflected in the media response to the *Times*' report. Consistent with their complicity in both the impeachment conspiracy and the theft of the 2000 election, the major networks have given virtually no coverage to the *Times* articles and the issues they raise.

The Democrats have remained similarly silent. The last thing they want is a public airing of the criminality that underlies the Bush administration.

Nevertheless, the very fact that this story has appeared in a leading publication of the establishment has far-reaching objective significance. The *Times* report is only one example of a growing genre of political post mortems on the stolen election of 2000. In recent weeks numerous reports have appeared documenting the widespread disenfranchisement of working class and minority voters in Florida. Books have begun to appear indicting the Supreme Court for its role in flouting democratic rights and handing the election to Bush.

These publications reflect a deep-going crisis of political rule in the US, a crisis that has been exacerbated by the installation of a government by anti-democratic means. Seven months after Bush's inauguration, the political establishment is unable to put to rest questions about the legitimacy of his administration. Within the ruling elite there is a gnawing fear that the breach with democratic methods is discrediting the entire political system and paving the way for the radicalization of broad layers of the working population.



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