

New York Times, Washington Post suppress media recount of Florida vote

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A consortium of major American news organizations, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, has decided to withhold the results of its recount of ballots cast in Florida in the 2000 presidential election. The consortium had planned to publish its report this week, and although its decision to suppress its own findings has received virtually no media attention, the reason is made clear in a September 23 column by *New York Times* Washington bureau chief Richard L. Berke.

In a column that enthusiastically welcomes the dissolution of all political opposition in Washington in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks, Berke writes: “Until September 11, the capital was riding a historically partisan period, with leading Democrats still portraying their president as ‘appointed’ by the Supreme Court. In a move that might have stoked the partisan tensions—but now seems utterly irrelevant—a consortium of new organizations, including The New York Times, had been scheduled this week to release the results of its ambitious undertaking to recount the Florida presidential ballots. (That has been put on hold indefinitely).”

In other words, the *Times* and its counterparts in the consortium have decided to conceal from the American people facts damaging to the Bush administration’s claims to political legitimacy. They are doing so for the express purpose of suppressing dissent and bolstering the president as he prepares to take the American people into war and makes sweeping attacks on their civil liberties.

This act of self-censorship is entirely in keeping with the overall response of the media to the events of the past two weeks—a response that in coming years will be widely seen as among the most shameful episodes in the history of American journalism. Neither in the broadcast nor the print media is there any attempt whatsoever to examine the claims of the Bush administration. All statements emanating from the White House and the Pentagon, even those known to be lies, are presented to the public as good coin.

What “now seems utterly irrelevant” to Berke is the fact the very government which is committing the population to a

war of undefined duration and dimensions, with all of the tragic consequences this entails, was installed through the suppression of votes and judicial fiat. Berke voices his own cynicism toward the theft of the 2000 election when he writes: “The indecisiveness of last year’s election gave the nation a civics lesson, but one that lent itself to snide jokes, not grave consideration.”

This attitude, so crudely expressed and brazen in its contempt for democratic principles, cannot come as a surprise to anyone who has seriously considered the trajectory of news reporting in the US over the past decade. It says a great deal about the role of the media and the outlook that pervades editorial offices and network news bureaus.

The media, however, does not exist in a void. Its degeneration reflects more profound tendencies within society and the political system.

The suppression of the Florida recount, and the *Times*’ justification for it, exemplify the role of the media as a de facto organ of the state. Journalists like Berke, who occupy prominent positions within the media establishment, no longer conceive of themselves, even remotely, as protectors of democratic institutions and the rights of the people, with a responsibility to inform and educate the public so that it can assert its interests in opposition to those who wield power.

One component of bourgeois democratic institutions in the US was the traditional conception of the press as the “Fourth Estate,” an independent force that served as a check on the power of the state. This notion, often enough expressed more in the breach than in the observance, and always attenuated by corporate control of the media and the innumerable ties that existed between the media establishment and state agencies, including the CIA, has now been thoroughly eroded and repudiated. Today, media operatives overwhelmingly, and as a matter of course, conceive of their task as the defense of the corporate elite and the state, as against the right of the people to know.

The debasement of the US media can be traced in relation to the great political convulsions of the past 30 years. During

the Vietnam War and the Watergate crisis, major news organs such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* played a significant role in exposing the lies of successive administrations, culminating in the exposure of the criminal and authoritarian actions of the Nixon administration. In the aftermath of Watergate, however, there was a determined campaign to bring the media more tightly to heel, to which the media succumbed with relatively little resistance.

Today it is all but inconceivable that the *Times* would publish anything comparable to the Pentagon Papers, or the *Washington Post* anything like the series of exposures that ultimately led to the resignation of Richard Nixon.

Already by the time of the Iran-Contra crisis of the mid-1980s, the element of press cover-up for the unconstitutional actions of the Reagan administration far outweighed that of serious investigation and exposure. With the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the media assumed the role of conduit for the propaganda handed down by the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon. The networks and the press submitted with barely a whimper to unprecedented restrictions on the reportage of battle preparations and the actual conduct of the war. To this day, the American media have not revealed the number of Iraqis killed and wounded in that uneven slaughter.

In the 1990s the role of the media assumed an even more pernicious form. Leading newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* lent their prestige to the series of scandals mounted by the Republican right to destabilize the Clinton administration. They became sounding boards for a thoroughly anti-democratic conspiracy by extreme right-wing forces to remove an elected president from office.

Berke's newspaper, the *Times*, played a particularly vile role. *Times* reporter Jeff Gerth lent credibility to the anti-Clinton machinations of unreconstructed segregationist elements, Christian fundamentalists and sections of the Republican leadership with his series of articles in the early '90s on the Whitewater affair—articles based on little more than speculation and rumor. The *Times* later embraced the Monica Lewinsky scandal and unswervingly depicted the sex-based witch-hunt led by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr as a legitimate investigation, downplaying Starr's attacks on civil liberties. In this manner the *Times* legitimized the political conspiracy that culminated in the impeachment of Clinton.

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Within weeks of Clinton's acquittal by the Senate, Gerth and the *Times* were at it again, publishing a series of witch-hunting articles against Los Alamos nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee. These tracts provided a platform for sections of the

Republican Party that were simultaneously seeking to create a Cold War-style hysteria against "Communist" China, and brand Clinton as a traitor, who supposedly traded nuclear secrets to the Chinese government in return for campaign contributions in the 1996 election. The biased and sensationalist character of Gerth's reporting was exposed when the federal case against Lee collapsed. In the end, the *Times* was compelled to issue a public apology.

The political wars of the 1990s revealed the profound erosion of American democratic institutions. The Republican Party had been largely taken over by extreme right-wing and fascist forces, and the Democratic Party had proven itself incapable of opposing their attack on democratic rights.

In the 2000 election, the outcome of this protracted political decay was expressed in a fundamental break with democratic traditions and procedures. The Republican Party, with the tacit support of the media, set out to steal the presidential election, and with the aid of the right-wing majority on the Supreme Court, succeeded. It met with no serious resistance, either during or after the theft of Florida's electoral votes, from the Democrats.

The 2000 election demonstrated that within the American ruling elite, including both capitalist parties and the media establishment, there exists no significant constituency for the defense of democratic rights. The decision of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major news outlets to suppress the results of their Florida recount underscores this fact. It demonstrates that the break with democratic forms of rule that occurred last year was irrevocable.

Now, as the Bush administration hurtles toward war and launches an unprecedented drive to strengthen the police powers of the state and dismantle democratic safeguards, the *Times* and the rest of the media hail the suppression of political opposition and the de facto establishment of one-party rule as a positive good.

The American people must take heed: the ruling elite is well on the way to establishing an authoritarian, anti-democratic state.

No serious resistance to such a course will emerge from within the political establishment. That must come from a politically united and independently organized working class movement, fighting with its own party on the basis of a socialist program committed to the defense of democratic rights.



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