

Our Little Secrets

VOTE FRAUD 2000: OUTSIDE FLORIDA

Black voters cast their ballots for Al Gore in record numbers last November 7. Their votes were also rejected in astounding numbers. A variety of new post-election surveys suggest that hundreds of thousands of black and Hispanic voters across the country were systematically disenfranchised at the polls. In Cook County, Illinois, alone, more than 120,000 votes cast in black precincts were discarded. In Fulton County, Georgia, which encompasses most of the Atlanta area, nearly one in every 16 votes cast in black precincts were rejected by voting machines.

The situation in nearby white middle class precincts was strikingly different. There the error rate varied from one percent to less than a half a percent. Much of the problem seemed to stem from the kind of voting machines used. Richer, whiter areas tended to have hi-tech optical scanner systems which allegedly have an error rate of less than one percent while urban precincts tended to use older punch card systems with an average error rate of three percent, regardless of the dominant race in the precincts. In black precincts using punch card machines the discard rate is more than seven percent.

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Some of this has to do with money. The voting machines in Fulton County, for example, were purchased in 1964. Precinct officials say they simply can't afford to upgrade. Of course, the more affluent (and whiter) suburban counties of DeKalb and Cobb have gone to optical scanners with a minimal error rate. But even that scenario is political, since allocations for election equipment are often made by the state legislatures.

In Cook County, election official purchased an error correction device that would immediately spit out ballots with problems, allowing the voters to recast their votes. But the Republican-controlled senate in Illinois passed a measure prohibiting Cook County from using the error correction devices, arguing that might create "an equal protection" problem for precincts which didn't have them installed. However, the senate, which oversees voting rules in the state, allowed similar devices to be used in predominately white precincts elsewhere.

Despite the shocked post-Florida tones of the press, this is not a new phenomenon. In 1978, a political science professor at Ohio State University surveyed ballot discards in white and black precincts across Ohio. He found that two percent of ballots were disqualified in white suburbs, while more than 20 percent were disqualified in black precincts. His results were ignored by policymakers, both Republican and Democrat.

A 1990 report by the clerk of elections for Cook County spelled out what it called "effective disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of black voters". The 48-page report concluded that in the 1988 presidential election more than ten percent of black votes were disqualified, while only one percent of white votes were thrown out. The report also calculated that the disqualified votes in black precincts cost Democrat Adlai Stevenson III his election in the very close gubernatorial race of 1982. A similar report was conducted by election officials in Atlanta after the 1992 election. They found that 108 of the 125 precincts with more than five percent of the ballots disqualified were in black precincts. Even so, the pleas of the election clerk for new machines were ignored.

At the national level, the Democratic Party has been curiously silent about the fate of its black voters, who were so sedulously courted during the election. The DLC con-

tinues to push the Democrats to the right, blaming Gore's defeat on his supposedly populist rhetoric. At least eleven Democratic senators have pledged their support to Bush's choice for attorney general, John Ashcroft. Under the rules of the senate, the tabulation of the electoral college votes could have been challenged by a single senator, thus throwing the election to the House and Senate. The Congressional Black Caucus searched in vain for a single Democratic senator to lodge a protest, if only to raise legitimate questions about the validity of the election and the supreme court's contorted ruling. Not one Democrat was up to the challenge. (There are no blacks in the senate and no blacks ran for any senate seat this year.)

When black Democrats expressed their anger over the party's lack of interest, Gore stepped forward to try to soothe them. His advice: give the Bush administration a chance and work with them over the next six months.

BILL ON AL

Attending the annual Texas Monthly bash, George W was asked what he and Bill Clinton had talked about in their White House photo op. George W described how he had asked Clinton why Al Gore was taking his defeat with such poor grace. "It's been eight years", Clinton genially replied, "and we still haven't figured out Al." Then he added hastily: "But he's been a great vice president."

WESTWARD LOOK, THE LAND IS DARK!

The Age of Clinton signaled its passing in California with rolling blackouts, or at least the threat of them. It's entirely appropriate. At the substantive level Clintonism was the economic program of the Democratic Leadership Council, preaching the glories of deregulation and an unfettered marketplace. Corporations would flourish and the public bask in the beneficial consequences of corporate aggrandisement. Corporate shills like the Natural Resources Defense Council lent their weight to the push for deregulation.

Westward look, the land is dark! Californians are braced for utility bills two and three times what they were a year ago and two once mighty giants, Pacific Gas & Electric, and Southern California Edison, teeter on the lip of bankruptcy. The price hikes for electricity and natural gas presently being touted will undoubtedly spawn a new popu-

As the sun sets on Clinton time, the verdict comes in on Democrats' dereg posture: an airline cartel and tripled utility bills.

list movement, calls for public ownership of utilities and energies supplies. It's hard to preach the virtues of an unregulated marketplace to small businesses bankrupted by their fuel bills and householders who can't afford heat or air-conditioning.

More parables of deregulation: Amid the threat of blackouts a CounterPunch coeditor left Humboldt county, northern California flew from Eureka to San Francisco and climbed on a TWA flight to New York. The Boeing 757 was about half full. After a couple of hours in the air the captain genially announced turbulence over Denver, adding that TWA had just been sold to American Airlines, but passengers shouldn't be concerned "because those of you with TWA advantage miles will make out like gangbusters".

The captain must have felt he was in line for a financial killing, because he was in jaunty mode for the rest of the flight, alerting "passengers on the left hand side to a spectacular moon", meanwhile consoling the starboard-side travellers with the news that "in a few minutes you will have an unusual view of Manhattan", which turned out to be the same old flight across Central Park. The flight attendant gazed gloomily down at her beverage inventory, clearly seeing little in her future to cheer about.

Airline dereg, remember, was sold to us in 1978, back in the Carter era, as the promise of scores of new airlines battling to offer superior service and keen prices. Here we are in the dawn of 2001 and it looks as though we'll be down to a couple of airlines by the end of the year. For people taller than about 5'6" a flight anywhere is a guarantee of physical constriction bordering on torture. Short and tall alike pick up colds or flu in the foul air and are spared food poisoning only because most airlines have given up serving food altogether in favor of pretzels. If the traveling distance is less than a thousand miles many now prefer to drive, particularly given the news of the soaring likelihood of runway collisions. There are some bargains to be sure, but in general prices are grotesquely high.

In the case of San Francisco at least, there's one paradoxical consequence of its semi-paralysis. Enlightened planners have made the airport into an increasingly pleas-

ant place to spend the day. With a couple of hours to waste between two flights the CounterPunch coeditor was able to take in no less than four exhibitions, three of them of the finest quality. Throughout the airport there were on that particular day no less than 22 exhibitions available for inspection.

On this occasion the United terminal had a very fine show of drums and other percussive instruments. South Terminal itself featured an interesting display of police hats, collected by patrolman Calvin Chow of the SFPD during his trips to Europe. (Chow's webpage thanks Alexander Gulyaev of the Vladivostok PD for crucial help in designing the site.) The picks of the bunch were an astrakhan hat worn by Soviet police officers in the 1970s in the Caucasus, the cockaded ceremonial hat of the assistant commissioner of the London metropolitan police, the dashing plume of some Italian law enforcer of high rank in the early part of the century. There were many samples of service hats of Asian police officers, all of them banal.

AMY'S ANGER

Having been deposited safely at JFK by the jaunty TWA captain the coeditor made his way a day later to one of CounterPunch's favorite restaurants in Manhattan, Cendrillon, on the west side of Mercer St, in SoHo a couple of blocks north of Canal, where Romy Dorotan presides over an Asian fusion menu with Filipino roots. Romy once studied political science at the University of York in the UK, then at Temple, but sensibly laid aside the texts of Locke, Mill and the others in favor of cooking, acme of the fine arts. It was Joseph Conrad, introducing a cookbook by his wife Jessie, who wrote that of all the books, only those on cookery are morally above suspicion. Their one aim, the author of *The Heart of Darkness* wrote, is "to increase the happiness of mankind, to add to the cheerfulness of nations".

Romy's redoubtable wife, Amy Besa, greeted the coeditor warmly. "Alexander! Only this morning I was cursing your name." Then she hissed out the single word "Ashcroft", thereby indicating that she held CounterPunch personally responsible for the defeat of Al Gore and the success of the Bush putsch.

We teased Amy by suggesting that she

was only opposed to Ashcroft because he anointed himself with Crisco and that if he'd performed the same religious rite with a first pressing of choice olive oil she would be cheering his nomination as attorney general. Amy denied this indignantly and continued to shower abuse. But will Ashcroft be effectively worse than Attorney General Janet Reno? This time eight years ago she was four months away from incinerating the Branch Davidians at Waco, and on the edge of a tenure that saw her fervent support for the "war on drugs", aka a war on the poor, most especially the blacks; her contributions to the crime bills of 1994 and 1996; the targeting of minority youth; her complaisance towards onslaughts on the Bill of Rights? It's a tough act to follow.

No doubt about it, Gale Norton, nominated as Interior Secretary, is scarcely nature's friend. Her dreams are of Exxon's Grand Canyon and Disney's Yosemite. But once again, we should retain our perspective. Consider, for example, Bill Clinton's exit order, banning roads and logging across more than millions of acres of public land.

In all, the order, riddled with escape clauses, envisages a 2.5 per cent reduction of total timber sales in the national forests, which isn't much and if she's smart, Norton will reverse the order simply by opting for one of the other options offered in the environmental impact statement which formed the basis of Clinton's order.

What else can Norton do that Babbitt hasn't already set in motion? Not much. Last year Babbitt put a moratorium on the listing of endangered species, and he's smiled on the privatization of public assets through land trades, whereby timber corporations get old growth and we get the cut-over terrain. Salmon protection? The Clinton administration let the Republicans off the hook on that one, insisting that the dams on the Snake River won't be breached. Oil leasing off the continental shelf?

For Bush-Cheney it would be political suicide. Reagan tried, and had to back off. Norton will go after the National Environmental Protection Act, but here again Babbitt and Gore paved the way, with their Habitat Conservation Plans that have ushered so many corporate foxes into the coop. CP

Now the Cold War Is Over

Russia Nukes Itself

Remember Minatom? Here in CounterPunch, 18 months ago, we broke the news of a plan to make Russia a dump site for the world's nuclear waste. Well, now it's official. Russia has now offered itself up as the world's nuclear dumping ground. On December 20, the Russian parliament voted 320-30 to overturn an environmental law that prohibited the import of commercial nuclear waste. The move, which clears the way for the US to begin shipping spent fuel to Russia, has received almost zero coverage in the American press.

The vote capped a two-year lobbying blitz by Minatom, the Russian nuclear agency, and an international assortment of nuclear profiteers, ranging from former CIA agents and tycoons to European and Japanese utilities and even a few renegade environmental groups, including the Natural Resources Defense Council. Minatom is now empowered to accept more than 20,000 tons of radioactive waste from 14 countries over the next 10 years. The waste is slated for storage at sites across Russia, where it will more than double the nation's own swelling inventory of nuclear waste and spent fuel, now estimated to total more than 14,000 tons.

Russian officials have boasted that dumping fees will bring \$20 billion into the Russian treasury—much of it going to the notoriously corrupt Minatom itself.

Much of the money may go to build a new generation of nuclear power plants. According to a leaked May 2000 document, titled "Strategy for nuclear development in 2000-2050", Minatom has proposed the construction of some three dozen new breeder commercial atomic reactors in Russia, which it says will create a stockpile of high-grade plutonium for a new phase of nuclear weapons which Russian enviros call "dirty nukes". Any scheme to reprocess the spent fuel into weapons-grade plutonium would violate the International Atomic Energy convention.

Yuri Adamov, the head of Minatom, claims that some of the money will be set aside for environmental cleanup of Russia's estimated half-million toxic dumps. But Russian greens and some environmental bureaucrats have charged that much of the money will simply end up in the pockets of the Minatom "Mafia." "You can't trust a

word Adamov says," said Yuri Vishnevsky, head of the Russian State Nuclear Regulatory Agency, a rival of Minatom. "Most of the money from this scheme will either be eaten up by Minatom or stolen."

The Duma's decision flouted the most energized environmental campaign in Russian history. Russian environmental groups had gathered 2.5 million signatures to put the nuclear waste dump issue as a national reformation to be voted on by the Russian people, a half million more than required by Russian law. There's little doubt the initiative would have passed overwhelmingly. Polls showed that upwards of 90 percent of Russians opposed the radioactive imports. This convinced the Yabloko faction of the Duma to vote unanimously against the meas-

"This appears to be the largest discharge of nuclear contaminants into the environment anywhere on earth."

ure, even in the face of offerings of money from Minatom lobbyists.

But at the last moment the Kremlin threw out more than 600,000 signatures on technicalities. Russian greens say they were sabotaged.

Russian president Vladimir Putin has made no effort to conceal his disdain for the growing environmental movement in Russia, saying last year that he believed Russian greens were a tool of "foreign secret services".

As the risks of a radioactive catastrophe in Russia, the Putin government is rapidly moving to sheer away the nation's few environmental safeguards. Putin has abolished the State Environmental Commission, the equivalent of the EPA and also emasculated the oversight powers of the Russian Nuclear Regulatory Agency (GAN). He has consolidated all authority on nuclear power with Minatom. GAN had angered Putin and Minatom when it withdrew the licenses of several nuclear plants after repeated accidents.

With the implosion of the Russian military, Minatom has positioned itself as perhaps the most powerful agency in the Russian government, with ties to western capitalists, and the Russian police and spy agen-

cies. Now Minatom is even running its own bureaucrats for public office. V.V. Malkov, Minatom's director of a nuclear reactor in Ozersk, was recently elected mayor of that city in the southern Urals. During his campaign, he pledged to "repulse the so-called Greens".

Minatom has taken a cue from the public relations strategies of European and American corporations and begun to set up phony green groups. In November, Minatom funded the creation of Environmental Forum, a green front group that lobbied for the import of nuclear waste and the creation of a new generation of nuclear power plants.

All of this comes on the heels of allegations that Minatom has been dumping nuclear waste at a weapons plant in Siberia directly into the Tom River, just north of the Siberian city of Tomsk, home to 500,000 people. (No, this should not be confused with the pollution of the Toms river. That exploit, by Ciba-Geigy, took place in New Jersey.) The Seversk complex contains the largest concentration of nuclear reactors and ura-

nium process plants in the world. It was also the site of some of the worst nuclear waste spills in history. But the findings of a joint Russian/American team of scientists suggest that the high levels of radioactivity in the Tom River are not the product of historical spills but of current dumping of radioactive waste, including Strontium-90 and phosphorus-32, by Minatom.

The amount of radioactivity in the Tom River has been estimated to be the equivalent of the annual radioactive discharge from 10,000 nuclear reactors. "This appears to be the largest discharge of nuclear contaminants into the environment anywhere on earth," says Norm Buske, an American scientist who was part of the team investigating the Seversk plant.

"The worst part is that the contamination continues today and yet the government and the nuclear industry hides the real information from the public," says Elena Pashenko, a spokesperson for Siberian Scientists for Global Responsibility, based in Novosibirsk. "Under these circumstances, it is imperative for international environmental organizations to join forces."

Pashenko is right, of course. And that's precisely what makes NRDC's role in helping to lift the Russian ban on import of nuclear waste all the more despicable. CP