

Writing from the Center: *The New York Times* and the Florida Election Dispute

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The 2000 presidential election was one of the most closely contested elections in our nation's history. Soon after the polls closed, it became apparent that the final tally between the Democratic candidate Al Gore and the Republican candidate George W. Bush would be extremely close. Network news programs broadcast on election night well into the next morning as one candidate, then the other, seemed to gain the advantage. As the election results became more distinct, however, attention turned to Florida, where fewer than one thousand votes separated the candidates, with Bush enjoying a tenuous lead. Over the next few weeks the Florida election dispute went through several Byzantine twists and turns, with the Gore team pushing for—and in some cases getting—recounts of Gore-friendly counties, and the Bush forces feverishly working to declare the whole matter settled and Bush the new president of the United States. Finally, in early December, the matter went to the United States Supreme Court. The Court decided in *Bush v. Gore* that there were insufficient grounds for continuing the recount process and in effect declared Bush the next president. The mainstream media—including *The New York Times*—were fixated with the entire electoral drama, with the story usually given the lead slot on the evening news or the front page of the newspaper. Yet after the Court handed down its decision, this coverage virtually ceased except for a cursory analysis of the Court's decision. There was little attempt to question the basis of the Court's ruling,

or whether Gore would have had sufficient votes to achieve victory had a recount been allowed to proceed. Why? The answer, it seems, lies in the “centrist” bias of *The New York Times*. Jeff Cohen, the executive director of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, has argued that mainstream media outlets such as *The New York Times* emphasize “system supporting news” that focuses on how well “the system works” in resolving difficult situations, rather than questioning the wisdom of the system itself.¹ By comparing how the *Times* portrayed the aftermath of the Court decision with the coverage given by media outlets on the left (*The Nation, Extra!*) and outlets on the right (*The National Review*) we will be able to see the “centrist” bias of the *Times* and its editorial mandate to preserve the authority and status of “the system.”

In order to analyze the intensity of *Times* coverage before and after the Supreme Court decision, this study will look at how often the election controversy appeared on the front page over roughly a two-month period. The front page of a newspaper is the first element of the paper that a subscriber sees in the morning, and it is the aspect of the paper that is seen through the glass of newspaper vending machines. By selecting certain events to place on the front page, the editors of a paper help decide what is newsworthy and what should be given the greatest precedence in the minds of its readership. The decision to give (or not give) a story front-page status vitally affects the number of readers who will read the story and also guides the reader to view stories as “more important” or “less important” based on where these stories are found in the paper.

After the presidential election on November 7, 2000, *The New York Times* covered the election story with a frequency and depth rarely seen and usually reserved only for war. For nineteen straight days from November 8 to November 27, the *Times*

made the election dispute the banner headline, with each of these headlines running across the length of the front page. Even after covering the story for three weeks, the *Times* continued to place heavy importance on the story. From November 28 to December 12 the election dispute never failed to receive a front-page headline, and on certain days these headlines returned to the front-page-wide treatment that the coverage saw in the early days of the dispute. The editors of the *Times* clearly saw the events in Florida as being extremely newsworthy and gave the story an enormous amount of “real estate” when it came to preparing the headline for the next day’s paper.

Moreover, the front page itself was covered with stories concerning the election dispute. It was not uncommon for two, three, or even more stories about the controversy to occupy the front page. Indeed, the *Times* was so eager to cover the dispute that the sort of international stories that the *Times* usually prides itself on were pushed off the front page in order to give pride of place to the election controversy. Reading only the front page of the *Times* during this period, an individual might be tempted to think that world events went on hiatus, and other national affairs largely ceased to exist. Before the Supreme Court decision, the *Times* front-page coverage of the election dispute was as intense as it was exhaustive, and represented the sort of single-topic focus rarely seen in the cosmopolitan *Times*.

On December 12, however, the Supreme Court handed down its decision on the Florida election matter. By a 5-4 decision, the justices ruled that all recounts in Florida should stop, effectively ending the election dispute. One might think that given the far from unanimous nature of the Supreme Court decision, the shocking use of the doctrine of federal sovereignty by a group of conservative justices known for their decades-long

support of states' rights, and the perhaps doubtful authority of the Supreme Court to hear this state matter at all, that the decision of the Supreme Court would have also been a huge news story, worthy of its own series of week-long banner headlines and in-depth coverage. Indeed, a scandal seemed to be already starting as Justices Stevens, Breyer, and Ginsburg stepped forward in their opinion to call the decision a severe blow to "the confidence in the judge as an impartial guardian of the rule of law."² Moreover, the *Times* itself seemed to recognize a new story in the making when it called the Bush mandate "shaky" with lingering "questions about his legitimacy."³

However, by the next edition of *The New York Times* the centrist mandate of the editorial board had won out. The Supreme Court, perhaps the most sacred and untouchable part of "the system," had made its decision, and the *Times* would allow no hint of disdain for this institution or questions about the legitimacy of Bush's presidency to taint its front page. The December 14 *Times* front page featured a story entitled "The 43rd President George Walker Bush" with a dignified looking picture of Bush above the story.⁴ The front page also declared the presidential race to be "over" and played up Bush's "Theme of Reconciliation" to imply that the dispute had been completely resolved.⁵ Perhaps even more interesting was the front page of the December 15 *Times*—not for what it did say but for what it did not. The front page made absolutely no mention of the controversial Supreme Court decision that had dominated the entire paper just two days before. Instead, the front page featured stories about the actions of "president-elect" Bush.⁶ By examining the *Times* on these two crucial days we thus see how the *Times* exhibits a centrist bias and strives ultimately to protect "the system." The effort of the *Times* to "kill" the controversy over the Supreme Court decision is seen most clearly by

examining its front page for the month after the decision was handed down. Earlier, this study described how the *Times* made the election dispute a leading headline every single day from November 8 to December 14. Yet in the month after the decision, the dispute never—not once—was given a headline on the front page.

Was this because the election dispute suddenly ceased to be newsworthy? No. Gore appeared to be pulling ahead before the recounts were stopped. Moreover, many Americans—upset by the Court’s decision—continued to be deeply interested in the election dispute even after the Court’s ruling. Even without considering the historical importance of the Court’s decision, the story still seemed to hold the interest of many Americans, the usual prerequisite for a good news story. Yet for the *Times*, the election dispute might as well have happened fifty years ago in another country.

Instead, the *Times* devoted its front page to enhancing the legitimacy of president-elect Bush. The first step of this process was to minimize Vice President Gore’s stature. On December 17 the *Times* ran a story entitled “Many Democrats appear skeptical of Gore’s future.”⁷ Next, the *Times* featured stories about Bush choosing his cabinet and engaging in other “presidential” acts associated with the transition in order to make Bush appear more legitimate. Finally, the *Times* engaged in a photo-visual blitz December 19 to 22, giving over the front page to images that worked to enhance Bush’s legitimacy.

The first of these images was a December 19 photo of Laura Bush meeting and smiling alongside Hillary Clinton. This image served to help transfer the presidential mantle from one couple to another. The imagery of transference was greatly enhanced by December 20 images of President Clinton walking alongside Bush at the White House

and Bush meeting with a smiling Al Gore. Lastly, December 22 featured a prominent image of Bush resigning his post as governor of Texas, lending an air of finality to the electoral process.

As December turned into January, the *Times* continued to employ its front page to secure greater legitimacy for Bush, culminating in an effusive inaugural edition. The January 7 edition is particularly illuminating. The day before, the Congress had confirmed Bush's victory in the Electoral College, with Al Gore presiding and the Congressional Black Caucus attempting to block a counting of Florida's votes. Given the enormous news impact of the election dispute, one might think that such an event would be worthy of a front-page story. Actually, the story ran on page 17. The only front-page mention of the story was a picture of Al Gore resignedly presiding over the whole process, further lessening his stature. Then on January 14, the *Times* began a series of laudatory pieces on President Bush in preparation for his inaugural. The January 14 piece described Bush as a deeply reflective man and ran an accompanying picture of Bush looking thoughtful and serious.

However, coverage of the inauguration day saw the greatest effort to establish Bush's legitimacy. The January 21 *Times* included headlines like "Tradition and Legitimacy," as well as "Proud Father and Son Bask in History's Glow," and announced that "Unity" was a theme of the new administration.⁸ The "Tradition and Legitimacy" piece was the most triumphant, announcing that the people would grow to accept Bush as he assumed the mantle of the presidency, as symbolized by the "surpassing ritual" of the inauguration, where Bush assumed leadership of "a military and economic colossus that

bestrides the world.”⁹ In other words, accept that Bush is president and just be happy we live in such a great country.

Those who watched the inauguration day coverage might remember something less triumphant about the day—namely, the massive 20,000 strong protest that accompanied the inaugural parade and forced Bush to scuttle back into his limousine to avoid having something thrown at him. Given the recent election dispute and the huge size of the protest, you might expect it would at least get mentioned somewhere on the front page. Actually, the protests received only a small story on page 17, buried in eight pages of otherwise positive inaugural coverage. It is easy to see why a prominent media watchdog organization has charged that “the *Times* left readers with the impression that the dominant themes of the day were “Unity,” “Tradition,” and, above all, “Legitimacy.”¹⁰ Through studying the front page of *The New York Times* over an eleven-week period from November 8, 2000 to January 21, 2001, we can now see how the centrist bias of *The New York Times* manifested itself during the Florida election dispute. The paper began with massive—almost sensational—coverage of the dispute, with daily banner headlines for a month and continued heavy coverage through to the day of the Supreme Court’s decision. Yet the *Times*’s coverage of the reaction to the Court’s decision was almost nonexistent, while the election story itself—despite strong interest from millions of aggrieved Gore voters—died an instantaneous death. Election coverage was replaced with Bush coverage—and lots of it. Readers got to see Bush moving out of Texas, Bush walking with Clinton, Bush looking thoughtful, and Bush taking the oath of office.

Readers also read about Bush's cabinet decisions, Bush's reading list, and the "unity" of his inaugural address. In sum, the *Times's* coverage after the Court decision was carefully calculated to deliver a strong implicit message: Bush is president now; forget about the election dispute.

While *The New York Times* tried to bury the election dispute, other publications—particularly on the left—diligently tried to keep the story alive despite the "blackout" by the mainstream media. Foremost among these media outlets were *The Nation* and the publications of the FAIR media observation group. Unlike the *Times*, *The Nation* continued to question the rationale of the Supreme Court decision and the legitimacy of the Bush presidency long after the Court's decision on December 12. Whereas the *Times* inaugural coverage focused on a glowing tribute to Bush and the pageantry of his inaugural, *The Nation* produced a "Counter-Inaugural Issue" with a lead story entitled "The Tainted Presidency" and supported by pieces entitled "Five Criminal Justices," "Bush and the Confederacy," and "Florida's Disappeared Voters."¹¹ *The Nation* continued to question Bush's legitimacy as he began his term. In the March 26, 2001 issue, *The Nation* held a "Name the President!" contest in which readers were asked to select an appropriate title for the new president, with choices ranging from "Governor Bush" to "Spurious George" to "His Illegitimate."¹²

Even as late as December of 2001 *The Nation* continued to question the Bush victory and vociferously fought efforts by the mainstream media to declare that Bush would have won regardless of whether the recounts were allowed to continue. In three straight issues from December 3 to December 17, *The Nation* included pieces that questioned the way a "consortium" of mainstream media organizations had presented the

results of their recount findings. The December 3 article asserted that “Gore was favored by several thousand more Florida voters than Bush,” while the December 10 piece argued that the consortium-run recount definitively established Bush’s “proven political illegitimacy.”¹³ Finally, on December 17, 2001, noted author Gore Vidal argued that *The New York Times* itself was guilty of centrist bias in the way it chose to bury parts of the consortium report favorable to Gore deep in a story devoted to proving Bush’s ultimate legitimacy.¹⁴

The Nation was not the only media outlet that refused to conform to the centrist clique; the respected journalistic watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) also spoke with an alternative voice. FAIR attacked the sanguine inaugural coverage of the *Times* in a January 22 piece and continued to contest the mainstream version of events throughout the year.¹⁵ When *USA Today* and *The Miami Herald* tried to hide important data in an April recount story, FAIR published another piece arguing that “*USA Today* has violated journalistic principles and further confused the public.”¹⁶ Finally, FAIR joined *The Nation* in protesting the pro-Bush spin that the mainstream media chose to put on the results of the consortium recount. After giving strong evidence of how the mainstream media sought to “bury the lead” in the consortium recount story, FAIR concluded that “in looking back at the results of the Florida election, the media flinched.”¹⁷

Threatened by the arguments of the liberal press, right-wing publications such as the *National Review* felt compelled to respond to these allegations and gave the election dispute greater continuing coverage than the mainstream media. The *National Review* devoted three pages of its April 16, 2001 issue to an attempt to refute the arguments of a

recently published book on the Florida election dispute.¹⁸ Even as late as September 3, 2001 the *National Review* continued to give the lead book review to books concerning the Florida election story.¹⁹ If there really were no “legs” left in the Florida recount story, then why did even right-wing publications continue to devote valuable editorial space to battling their liberal foes over the matter?

Through our examination of liberal and conservative media outlets, it is now apparent that publications on both the left and right devoted more space to the election dispute than did the *Times* after the Supreme Court decision. Whereas the *Times*’s inaugural issue made no mention of the election dispute or even the massive protests, *The Nation*’s coverage pointedly reminded readers of the events that led to Bush’s inauguration. While the *Times* and other mainstream media outlets attempted to “spin” the results of the consortium recount to enhance Bush’s legitimacy, *The Nation* and FAIR heavily publicized the recount data that the mainstream media wanted to bury. Finally, even conservative publications like the *National Review* continued to view the matter as a subject worthy of debate with their liberal opponents. This analysis of the alternative media has therefore revealed the centrist bias of *The New York Times* in choosing to limit its post-decision coverage.

The New York Times prides itself on being the nation’s “paper of record.” Americans turn to this established paper for an authoritative and accurate account of important events. Yet after the Supreme Court’s decision, the paper’s front page utterly neglected to further explore the important ramifications inherent in the Court’s controversial decision. Instead, the *Times* chose to use the position of trust that had been given to it by the American people to squelch dissent and stifle dialogue. A new history

was created, in which Bush had a strong, clear mandate and the unequivocal support of the American people. The paper of record has become the paper of revisionism.

Notes

1. Jeff Cohen, "Propaganda from the Middle of the Road: The Centrist Ideology of the News Media," *Extra!* Oct.-Nov. 1989: 223.
2. R. W. Apple Jr., "A Shaky Platform on Which to Build," *The New York Times*, 13 Dec. 2000: 1.
3. Ibid.
4. Alison Mitchell, "The 43rd President: George Walker Bush," *The New York Times*, 14 Dec. 2000: 1.
5. David E. Sanger, "Theme of Reconciliation after Five-Week Wait," *The New York Times*, 14 Dec. 2000: 1.
6. Lizette Alvarez, "House Leader Differs with Bush on Across-the-Board Tax Cuts," *The New York Times*, 15 Dec. 2000: 1.
7. Richard I. Berke, "Many Democrats Appear Skeptical of Gore's Future," *The New York Times*, 17 Dec. 2000: 1.
8. R. W. Apple Jr., "Tradition and Legitimacy" ; Frank Bruni, "Proud Father and Son Bask in History's Glow" ; Frank Bruni and David E. Sanger, "Unity Is a Theme," *The New York Times*, 21 Jan. 2001: 1.
9. R. W. Apple Jr., "Tradition."
10. FAIR Editorial Board, "Action Alert: Ignoring Reality at the Inauguration," 22 Jan. 2001 <<http://www.fair.org>>.

11. *The Nation*, 5 Feb., 2001, Cover Page.
12. Nation Editorial Board, "Name the President," *The Nation*, 26 March 2001: 5.
13. David Corn, "Bush and the Butterflies," *The Nation*, 3 Dec. 2001: 5; Eric Alterman, "Freedom is History (and Vice Versa)" *The Nation*, 10 Dec. 2001: 6.
14. Gore Vidal, "The *Times* Cries Eke! Buries Al Gore," *The Nation*, 17 Dec. 2001: 13.
15. FAIR Editorial Board, "Action Alert: Ignoring Reality at the Inauguration," 22 Jan. 2001 <<http://www.fair.org>>.
16. FAIR Editorial Board, "Action Alert: USA Today Conceals Key Information in Recount Story," 11 April 2001 <<http://www.fair.org>>.
17. Jim Naureckas, "Burying the Lead: Democracy Denied," 15 Nov. 2001 <<http://www.fair.org>>.
18. Richard Lowry, "Bleeding Florida," *The National Review*, 16 April 2001: 49-52.
19. Mark Miller, "Unforgiven," *The National Review*, 3 Sep. 2001: 42-44.

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