

THE ELECTION THAT REFUSED TO DIE

By Michael Ventura

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Since Election Day developments here and abroad have both raised the stakes and highlighted what the stakes really are:

- On November 28, the Supreme Court declared that the city of Indianapolis violated the Fourth Amendment's prohibition against unreasonable searches -- that is, searches not based on reasonable suspicion of "individual wrongdoing." Indianapolis had set up "drug-interdiction checkpoints," randomly stopping cars so that police dogs could sniff for drugs; the ACLU challenged their right to do this. The case was being watched avidly by police departments around the nation in the hopes that they, too, could set up such generalized warrantless searches. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, by no stretch a liberal alarmist, wrote the majority opinion that struck down the Indianapolis practice: "Without drawing the line [at such searches] ... the Fourth Amendment would do little to prevent such intrusions from becoming a routine part of American life." The decision was 6-3. The dissenting judges were Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist and Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas -- often cited by George W. Bush as his favorites. If two more such appointees had been on the Court (as they are likely to be in a W. administration), this kind of police intrusion would have become, in O'Connor's words, "routine" in America. This ain't kid stuff. This is your right to due process. (Knowing this, would you still vote for Nader?)
- Venezuela has become one of our major oil suppliers. Its president, Hugo Chavez, has assumed nearly total power and has forged and/or strengthened ties with Cuba, Libya, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. As he's done this, by some strange coincidence the Clinton Administration has decided to send massive "drug-fighting" military aid to neighboring Colombia, giving us a military presence on Venezuela's border. In the last week, Colombia recalled its Venezuelan envoy because a spokeswoman for a left-wing guerrilla group was invited to speak to the Venezuelan Congress. Venezuela then recalled its envoy from Colombia, as President Chavez called the Colombian government "a rancid oligarchy that does not understand peace." Recently, Venezuela protested an American warship's intrusion into its waters, allegedly chasing drug smugglers. All the ingredients of conflict are in place. And W. is naming all the Gulf War's architects to his cabinet; one of that war's chief strategists, Dick Cheney, would be W.'s vice-president. Good morning, Vietnam.
- India's (dubious?) peace overtures regarding the disputed province of Kashmir on the India-Pakistan border were rejected on the day of the Venezuelan-Colombian flap. Pakistan sides with Kashmir. China sides with Pakistan. India and Pakistan are now, through the inattention of both the Bush Sr. and Clinton administrations, nuclear powers, albeit without the technology for efficient safeguards. This is the black hole of American foreign policy. Can a severely weakened presidency deal with it?

- Also in India: On November 20, tens of thousands of workers rioted in New Delhi, protesting a court order to close down roughly 90,000 small factories that employ a million people. New Delhi is one of the most nastily polluted cities in the world, and the courts were acting against the worst polluters. This situation highlights *the* most important environmental question outside our borders, an issue the affluent Nader/Green purists all but ignore: How do we stop pollution and planet rape in the Third World, when many millions of subsistence-level workers side with the polluters -- especially when Third World governments are unable to enforce environmental regulations in the face of workers willing to riot for their jobs? It is unlikely that the industrialized West would donate or even loan the hundreds of billions of dollars necessary to create alternatives for both the industries and the workers; and, even if they did, in oligarchical countries without much effective law, it is unlikely that such money would be used as we'd wish. Can such a massive dilemma be dealt with at all, even if the West had the will and the resources? Not with a stale-mated U.S. Congress and a beleaguered presidency, and not with a president like George W., who is still skeptical about the seriousness of global warming.

- Also on November 20: The European Union, with the support of both American-leaning England and America-wary France, agreed to establish a military force of 60,000 that would act independently of NATO -- i.e., independently of any American influence or chain of command, since the U.S. dominates NATO. "One of the most sensitive issues," *The New York Times* reported, "is the relationship with the incoming administration in Washington." The Clinton-Gore administration has been cautiously sympathetic to this move for European independence, proceeding gingerly and relying on commerce to be the deciding factor in the Euro-American relationship; it is difficult to imagine a Bush-Cheney administration, with Colin Powell as Secretary of State, as being anything but hostile to these developments. (An aside: Madeleine Albright has been the most inept, hapless Secretary of State in the history of the office, but the upside of her incompetence is that at least she has had little influence and has done little harm.) European leaders are reported to be salivating at America's political crisis, expecting to use this window of opportunity to assert themselves against a weakened, hobbled American government.

- The Mideast has swirled out of control, and a lame-duck Clinton-Gore administration has been helpless to influence the situation. On November 23, Israel threatened to sever "field-level security links" -- the nuts-and-bolts communications system by which all levels of both sides at least retained access to each other. On November 24, Russian President Vladimir V. Putin stepped into the vacuum, got both sides to agree to maintain the links, and negotiated a call between Yasir Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Putin has supported the European Union's military independence of NATO, and has forged close ties with the important leaders of Europe -- they clearly prefer him to Clinton, Gore, or W. With meager economic and military means at his disposal, Putin has yet managed to run diplomatic rings around America for more than a year. What does this portend for a weakened American presidency?

- On November 25, at the Hague, talks toward a worldwide environmental treaty hopelessly broke down. Purists preferred no treaty to a flawed treaty -- not taking into

consideration that *any* treaty would at least put the issues unavoidably on the agenda of a new American administration. (America being, by far, the world's largest generator of greenhouse gases, this is no small consideration.) Said a Dr. Michael Grubb, of London: "When something like this is killed, it is killed by an alliance of those who want too much with those who don't want anything." Environmental purists wanted a stronger treaty, the corporations wanted no treaty, and together they killed the possibility of any treaty. Now the American government has no legal obligation to deal with these issues on a worldwide scale, and a new administration can put it off indefinitely with scant international pressure to contend with.

- On November 24, there was an effective national strike in Argentina, involving millions of workers; they were protesting austerity measures. In addition: Most of the continent of Africa continues its free-fall into the abyss; Indonesia, the world's fourth-largest country, is in near-chaos, virtually ungovernable; and Mexico, our neighbor to the south and our biggest trading partner, openly admits that it can no longer trust its police force -- the rule of law in Mexico exists mainly on paper now, not in practice. In other words: Europe, Asia, the Mideast, and Latin America are boiling over simultaneously with enormous, perhaps overwhelming foreign policy challenges that the United States is unequipped to deal with. American influence is being eclipsed and/or simply ignored.
- Lastly, and most tellingly, the NASDAQ and Dow Jones have lost hundreds of billions of dollars in value since Election Day. This situation has merely been exacerbated by the election crisis; its roots go far deeper. Dig it: The Boom is over. And consider: Americans have been acrimonious, vicious, and divided, during "good" times. Imagine how we'll behave during the insecurities of recession.

Any one of these situations would have made for banner headlines in a normal month; but the headlines have all been about W. and Gore, so even most thinking Americans remain unaware of the conjunction of crises that have reached, or are near, the boiling point. As killjoys and die-hards have been reminding us, the new millennium mathematically begins one moment after midnight on January 1, 2001. Even Shakespeare could not have written it more tellingly: The collapse of the American political process in Election Year 2000 is both an event in itself and a world-class metaphor: The American Century is over.

No matter who becomes the president-elect, America will not be able to deal from strength with this storm of a world. We will deal, if we deal at all, from weakness, and in desperation to prove ourselves and to hold on to what we have. It won't work. It never has. Empires don't fall, they crumble. During the second debate, George W. Bush said, "A great nation should be humble." Expect to be humbled.

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