

BE HEARD OR BE HERDED

By Michael Ventura

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How's this for insanity? The NSA can tap my phone without a warrant, but "the Energy Department is ending required polygraph tests for thousands of workers at its nuclear weapons facilities [and] ... will also no longer periodically administer polygraph tests in areas of high security" (*The New York Times*, Oct. 5, p.23). Just as insane: Our chemical plants are still unprotected (*The New York Times*, Sept. 25, p.24). Not to worry, Donald Rumsfeld just convinced the prime minister of Montenegro – population 650,000, about the same as Baltimore – to lend units of its 2,500-man army to "help America's military operations ... with peace-keeping or special operations forces" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 27, p.6). Maybe he'll send them to Afghanistan where, after five years of American/British/NATO efforts, Taliban attacks are "more frequent and lethal" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 27, p.15) and the opium harvest is at a "record level" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 3, p.1). Or perhaps Montenegrins can patrol Baghdad, where the body count has nearly tripled (*The Washington Post*, Sept. 8, p.12). We need tiny Montenegro because our military's been run ragged. As the Army's Third Infantry Division prepares for its third Iraq tour, "equipment levels [have] fallen so low that it now [has] no tanks ... to use in training and [its] soldiers [are] rated as largely untrained in attack and defense" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 25, p.1). All of which is apparently fine with Dick Cheney, who famously told Tim Russett in September, "If we had it to do over again, we'd do exactly the same thing." Victory must be just around the corner, or why would Congress earmark \$20 million in military spending "for a celebration in the nation's capital 'for commemoration of success' in Iraq and Afghanistan" (*The New York Times*, Oct. 4, p.28)? Twenty million to throw a party while the Third Division is running out of tanks. Meanwhile, "health care costs are rising twice as much as inflation" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 27, p.C1), and, "once you adjust for inflation, you find that the income of a typical household headed by a college graduate was lower in 2005 than in 2000" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 8, p.29).

Republican stewardship of our government has miserably failed. Polls show that Americans finally realize this, including "weekly churchgoers [who are] about a quarter of all voters. ... Two years ago they favored the GOP by a double-digit margin. But in the new Pew survey, 44% leaned toward Republicans and 43% toward Democrats, a statistical dead heat" (*The Washington Post*, Oct. 6, p.6). You'd think Democrats could duplicate the 1994 Republican congressional landslide. Possible. It's also possible that the Democrats won't win the Senate or the House – because Democrats are, after all, Democrats and because U.S. elections can no longer be trusted.

At its highest levels the Democratic Party is in disarray. Democrats have about \$80 million less than Republicans for their get-out-the-vote campaigns, as usual. What's not usual is that Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean and Democratic Congressional Campaign Chairman Rep. Rahm Emanuel are "not talking, in a feud over money" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 24, p.WK1). With everything on the line, these guys aren't speaking! Dean's National Committee "has no plans to help finance a last-minute push" because it fears getting into debt, though Emanuel's "private polls have convinced

top party officials that they could pick up 40 or more [House] seats if they spend enough money for long-shot races" (*The Washington Post*, Oct. 18, p.12). In the *Post* article, Democratic "operative" Harold Ickes says that under these circumstances "there is more optimism than is probably warranted" about the party's prospects in November.

The GOP "has built its electoral success in the last two elections on identifying and producing nearly every obtainable Republican vote at the polls" (*The New York Times*, Oct. 15, p.1). Countless articles have been written about this get-out-the-vote operation; everyone knows how it's done, yet Democrats still don't do it. John Roberts reported, "[T]he Democrats admit that Republicans have it all over them in vote organization" (CNN, Oct. 12). Though the polls favor Democrats, the head of the Pew Research Center, Andrew Kohut, said that because of the Republican ability to get out the vote "the turnout consequences for the G.O.P. might not be as dire as these poll numbers suggest" (*The New York Times*, Oct. 15, p.1).

No one knows how many disaffected, discouraged Republicans will stay home on Election Day or vote for Democrats in anger. No one knows how many Democrats will vote. No one knows how many independents who went Republican last time will vote Democratic this time. And there's been very little reportage about the Hispanic vote. "March Today – Vote Tomorrow" was their slogan last May, but organizers have found it's easier said than done. Apparently they have been shamefully abandoned by the Democratic hierarchy. Juan Carlos Ruiz, coordinator of the National Capital Immigration Coalition: "We had the number of volunteers ready to go, but without financial support, without the technical support, it is very difficult" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 11, p.11).

We do know that, legally and openly, American elections have become much less small-d democratic, much less small-r republican. "Because of congressional redistricting plans that gave huge advantages to incumbents, fewer than 50 of the 435 House seats are competitive" (*The Washington Post*, Oct. 10, p.1). A majority of our citizens, as well as our politicians, value victory more than democracy. Fairness used to be a much-touted American ideal. You stated your case, put it to a vote, and gave it a fair shot. That's how the system was originally designed. It's been redesigned because citizens either weren't paying attention or hungered to win at all costs. The price paid: Many politicians, particularly in the House of Representatives, are no longer accountable. This, combined with our failure to demand a just campaign-finance system, has given us a form of government that is the envy of no one in this world and for which there is no properly descriptive name. It is not a democracy; it is not a republic. It is a corrupt, buy-and-sell, wheel-and-deal, ad hoc, short-sighted, stumblebum, incompetent, make-it-up-as-you-go-along business in which the few profit and the many don't – a government in name only, which daily fails seriously to address our most serious problems. We are neither governed nor ruled. We are ignored. That most of us don't make a peep about it is perhaps an indication that we deserve to be ignored. We've demanded to be flattered, agreed with, and comforted; we've demanded almost anything but competence. Only a massive shift in public sentiment – and public action – will change things, and no one knows if that's afoot.

The polls are encouraging, but we don't know if they'll translate into votes. Even if they do, we don't know that those votes will be counted.

"Votes in about half of the 45 most competitive Congressional races ... will be cast on electronic machines that provide no independent means of verification" (*The New York Times*, Oct. 19, p.1). I haven't space to detail what a colossal mistake these machines are. See Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s well-researched "Will the Next Election Be

Hacked?" (*Rolling Stone*, Oct. 5), or read "The Big Gamble on Electronic Voting" in the *The New York Times*, Sept. 24, p.BU3. "With about 40 percent of registered voters nationally expected to cast their ballots on these machines in the midterm elections, many local officials fear that the lack of a paper trail will leave no way to verify votes in case of fraud or computer failure" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 24, p.31). That article quotes experts at Johns Hopkins and Rice: The machines "are far below even the most minimal security standards." The article also notes that the makers of these machines have refused to allow an independent board of scientists to examine them – a fact that speaks for itself. Also noted: "In Tarrant County, Texas, electronic machines counted some ballots as many as six times, recording 100,000 more votes than were actually cast." Kennedy's article quotes Ion Sancho, a Florida election supervisor: "Every board of election has staff members with the technological ability to fix an election. Even one corrupt staffer can throw an election. Without paper records, it could happen under my nose and there is no way I'd find out about it."

The only antidote for a failure of democracy is the exercise of democracy. What every government fears most is a million citizens peaceably assembled at its front door, people who won't go home until they get what they came for. We must vote, and if the election's fishy, we must show up at the front doors of our state and federal governments. Be heard. Or be herded.

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