

# Electoral mischief and the bewildered herd

**SIX** months after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, affected areas are still lying in ruins with no relief in sight. New Orleans' evacuees have become a permanent diaspora, many with no means to return and no homes or even neighborhoods to return to. FEMA, citing budgetary constraints, is cutting off emergency housing allowances, forcing evacuees onto the street.

At the same time, the Republican-controlled Congress moved to make tax cuts for the wealthiest few Americans permanent at a cost of approximately \$1.5 trillion over the next decade. Add this figure to a stratospheric military budget that has grown by 45 percent under Bush, and add the costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which, through sleight of hand, are not part of the military budget, and there's no money left for anything. Hence, the new federal budget calls for even more draconian cuts to education, health, housing and social service programs. In essence, the new vision for government is one that perfects the art of destruction while building and maintaining nothing. New Orleans is now part of that nothing, with the Bush administration setting aside scant resources for disaster relief.

This is a government that scours the world looking to create disasters, not mitigate disasters. So it shouldn't surprise us that the Bushistas are diverting dollars earmarked for "disaster assistance" and using them to destabilize Latin American and Caribbean democracies. There is no moral cesspool too repugnant for these human maggots to wallow in.

Here's how it works. The Bush administration designates funds for disaster relief, giving them to the Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D.), who in turn fund a mischievous counter-intelligence operation called the Office for Transitional Initiatives

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(O.T.I.). O.T.I. essentially helps transition governments unfriendly to the Bush administration – though often friendly to their own people – into governments subservient to the Bush administration and U.S. corporate interests. The supposed disasters O.T.I. mitigates are political, usually the democratic election of populist leaders. Real democracy is a problem since people, when fully informed, tend to vote for their own best interests. These interests are often diametrically opposed to those of corporations that want to privatize essential services, energy companies that want to exploit their resources, foreign manufacturers that want to keep them non-unionized and bankers who want to divert their tax money from health and education to servicing debts left by American-backed dictators.

Propagandists argued long ago that a population can be controlled more effectively through information control than through military control. Television, put bluntly, is a less bloody means of manipulation than outright brutality, and history has shown that brutality breeds revolution. A “democracy” with a fully manipulated population is easily malleable and “stable.”

### **When democracy erupts**

“The bewildered herd,” as described by early 20th century communication theorist and journalist Walter Lippmann, is supposed to be a spectator in a democracy and not a participant. On rare occasions, however, the bewildered herd takes charge and manages to elect a populist who responds to its demands and not to those of the international moneyed interests. This is why Edward Bernays, one of the pioneers in the international field of propaganda, often referred to democracy as “chaos,” needing to be guided by an invisible elite. The O.T.I. goes to hotspots where democracy is erupting to help restore the herd to its bewildered state.

Since 2002, when a Bush administration-backed coup against Venezuela’s populist president, Hugo Chavez, failed, the O.T.I. has been in that country spending disaster relief money, unsuccessfully plying its trade. Chavez and his party have won the last seven Venezuelan elections by ever-growing margins. His style, by American standards, certainly isn’t smooth – at one point he went on national TV and described Condoleezza Rice as ugly, adding that he knew she wanted to sleep with him. Wacky? Yes, but it seems to have played well to the home audience.

After failing to dislodge him in the 2002 coup, the Bush administration sent the privately funded National Endowment for Democracy (N.E.D.) and the government-backed O.T.I. to Venezuela to organize and fund opposition propaganda campaigns. One Venezuelan group was just indicted on conspiracy charges for accepting \$31,000 from

the N.E.D. since Venezuelan law, like U.S. law, makes it a criminal offense to use foreign funds to attempt to sway the outcome of an election.

### **Strange disaster relief**

The Christian Science Monitor reports that the N.E.D. money, however, is chump change compared to the \$4.5 million that the O.T.I. spent just last year on campaigns directed at dislodging Chavez and his party from power. O.T.I. is certainly a strange "disaster relief" group. They describe their mission as "overtly political" and classify the names of groups that receive their aid. Their budget is a mystery, with the Monitor reporting that they have unusual budgetary flexibility for a government agency.

O.T.I. is also plying its mischievous trade in Haiti, tossing U.S. dollars into an election in the hemisphere's poorest country. The story in Haiti is particularly nasty. That nation's president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, was elected by one of the widest margins in the hemisphere. His fault was that he actually started delivering on his election promises and was moving toward refusing to service Haiti's international debt. Then, two years ago, a gang of thugs, allegedly armed by the Bush administration, invaded the country from the Dominican Republic, moving west, killing police officers and elected officials while freeing criminals from jail and arming them. At the height of the chaos, U.S. Marines seized President Aristide and removed him from the country.

The new Haitian government, installed with U.S. backing after the coup, was composed of exiled or formerly imprisoned criminals, many of whom were involved in grotesque human rights violations and drug trafficking. Death squads murdered over 2,000 members of the elected Haitian government and their supporters over the last two years.

### **Where they don't fear death**

Having gone the thug route to oust Aristide, the Bush State Department opted for propaganda to shore up Haiti's new government. Haiti, however, doesn't fit any existing model. The people have suffered so much that they don't fear death. And they have an unmatched historic reverence for democracy and independence that began in 1791 when the country was born in a slave revolt. Ten years later they defeated Napoleon's navy, a victory that marked the beginning of the end of colonialism in the Caribbean. This week they went to the polls to vote in an election that was postponed three times, delivering what seemed like a landslide victory to a close former associate of President-in-exile Aristide, Rene Preval – this despite U.S. meddling.

But there's a catch. Haiti's election laws are more democratic than ours. A candidate needs an outright victory of more than 50 percent, otherwise there's a runoff election.

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Exit polls and early vote counts put Preval at roughly 60 percent, with his closest rival at about 11 percent. But Preval's votes started slipping away, with American-style discrepancies in the final vote counts.

Two members of the Haitian Electoral Council are alleging election fraud, pointing to discrepancies between the official local vote tallies and the final numbers posted via computer. Officials have also added 72,000 blank ballots into the mix, counting them against Preval's necessary 50 percent. Another 125,000 ballots were ruled invalid. There were also Ohio-style hijinks, with closed polling stations in one Preval stronghold shutting out as many as 200,000 people. The end result is, at press time, Preval's count is a hair under 50 percent, meaning there will be a runoff with more opportunities for mischief, and the criminal government will stay in power and terrorize the Haitian population for at least one more month.

What the Haitians have demonstrated clearly, however, is that no amount of propaganda or violence will dislodge their determination for democratic self-rule. With a slew of opposition candidates garnering almost 90 percent of the vote, a Bush-style electoral coup is all but impossible. And with American troops bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, what would have been a likely U.S. "peacekeeping mission" (Operation Haitian Pride?) is highly unlikely. The sword is dull and the propaganda is ineffective. The "bewildered herd" will once again rule.

### **Like Haitians and Venezuelans!**

This all brings us back home. The Government Accounting Office (G.A.O.) this week released what under normal conditions – read: if we weren't "rendering" prisoners to other countries to be boiled alive – would have been a political tsunami. According to the G.A.O., the Bush administration spent \$1.6 billion over the last two and a half years on public relations operations. That's \$1.6 billion of our tax money commandeered for, among other things, O.T.I.-style partisan propaganda here at home, aimed at affecting domestic elections. Included in this figure is a mysterious \$15 million paid directly to individual members of the media. This information comes on the tail of previous disclosures concerning covert propaganda operations including the production of fake TV news stories and Bush administration payoffs to crooked journalists to slant stories even further in a pro-Bush direction than the normal corporate media spin.

Hopefully Americans will have the political sophistication and determination of Haitians and Venezuelans and persist through this frontal assault on our democracy. If we don't, we truly will be the bewildered masses Lippmann spoke of. And the folks from New Orleans will indefinitely be the homeless masses.