

Madame Butterfly and the absentee ballots

By Greg Palast
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On Friday, Theresa LePore, Supervisor of Elections in Palm Beach, candidate for re-election as Supervisor of Elections, chose to supervise her own election, no one allowed. This Tuesday, Florida votes for these nominally non-partisan posts. You remember Theresa, “Madame Butterfly,” the one whose ballots brought in the big vote for Pat Buchanan in the Jewish precincts in November 2000. Then she failed to do the hand count that would have changed the White House from Blue to Red.

This time, Theresa’s in a hurry to get to the counting. She began tallying absentee ballots on Friday in her own re-election race. Not to worry: the law requires the Supervisor of Elections in each county to certify poll-watchers to observe the count. But Theresa has a better idea. She refused to certify a single poll-watcher from opponents’ organizations despite the legal requirement she do so by last week. She’ll count her own votes herself, thank you very much!

And so far, she’s doing quite well. Although 37,000 citizens have requested absentee ballots, she says she’d only received 22,000 when she began the count. Where are the others? Don’t ask: though she posts the names of requesters, she won’t release the list of those who have voted, an eyebrow-raising deviation from standard procedure.

And she has no intention of counting all the ballots received. She has reserved for herself the right to determine which ballots have acceptable signatures. Her opponent, Democrat Art Anderson, had asked Theresa to use certified hand-writing experts, instead of her hand-picked hacks, to check the signatures. Unfortunately, while Federal law requires Theresa to allow a voter to correct a signature rejection when registering, the Feds don’t require her to permit challenges to absentee ballot rejections.

I know what you’re thinking. How could Madame Butterfly know how people are voting? Well, she’s printed PARTY AFFILIATION on the OUTSIDE of each return envelope. That certainly makes it easier to figure out which ballot is valid, don’t it?

And dear Reader, please take note of the implications of this story for the big vote in

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November. Millions have sought refuge in absentee ballots as a method to avoid the dangers of the digitizing of democracy. Florida and other states are reporting 400%-plus increases in absentee ballot requests due to fear of the new computer voting machinery. Some refuge. LePore is giving us an early taste of how the Bush Leaguers intend to care for your absentee ballot.

If there's no safety in the absentee ballot, how about the computerized machines? The LePores of America have that one figured out, too. On Friday, the day on which Theresa began her Kremlin-style vote count, the New York Times ran a puff piece on Jeb's Palm Beach political pet. Cub reporter Amy Goodnough derided fears of Democrats who painted "dark scenarios" about the computer voting machines Madame Butterfly installed over the objections of the state's official voting technology task force.

If you're wondering why the experts told her not to use the machines, I'll tell you – because the New York Times won't. It's not because the voting specialists are anti-technology Luddites. The fact is that Florida counties using touch-screens have reported a known error rate 600% greater than the alternative, paper ballots read by optical scanners. And those errors have occurred – surprise! – overwhelmingly in African-American precincts.

First Brother Jeb has teamed with LePore to keep the vote clean and white. Together they have refused the Democrats request for the more-reliable paper ballots as an option for voters. In Leon County, by contrast, Elections Supervisor Ion Sancho insisted on paper ballots and did not lose a single vote to error in the March presidential primary. Sancho told me it's a slam-dunk certainty that the computer screens will snatch away several thousand Palm Beach votes.

Theresa and the Jebster have been quite close since LePore came out of the closet. The Republican-turned-Democrat, nominally independent, this year accepted the sticky embrace of the Republican Party. One really has to wonder if she ever truly left the Blues in the first place.

It's a shame that Supervisor LePore was too busy counting her votes and rejecting ballots to respond to my phone calls. I wanted to be the first to congratulate her on her election victory – two days before the election. Or maybe she fears I might be the early birddog who catches the butterfly as she turns back into a worm.

Greg Palast is the author of the New York Times bestseller, The Best Democracy Money Can Buy. His article on vote manipulation in Florida for Harper's Magazine, was nominated for a 2002 National Magazine Award. On September 28, Disinfo/Ryko will release on DVD his film, "Bush Family Fortunes," based on Palast's investigative reports for BBC Television – described as "courageous reporting." (Michael Moore) and "twisted and