

Election recount

By [Robert Koehler](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Fooled Again: How the Right Stole the 2004 Election and Why They'll Steal the Next One Too (Unless We Stop Them)

Mark Crispin Miller
Basic Books

In early 2004, Pat Robertson divined the outcome of the presidential election, then ten months away. “I think George Bush is going to win in a walk,” he said on a broadcast of *The 700 Club*. “I really believe I’m hearing from the Lord it’s going to be like a blowout election in 2004.”

God—or at least the fervent, all-justifying, “Christian soldier” belief in God, and of course God’s opposite, evil—is the real topic of Mark Crispin Miller’s book. The volume is a primer for the many appalled students of the last presidential election, which was won by the incumbent not exactly “in a walk,” as Robertson predicted, but by a healthy enough margin that Bush could declare the next day, “America has spoken,” and claim, as though he needed one, a mandate.

As a meticulously researched explication of the case that there was serious fraud in that election, both blatant (myriad dirty tricks) and invisible (manipulation of electronic voting), *Fooled Again* is like several other recent books that examine the topic in gory detail. But what Miller also does is place election fraud—or election theft—in a psychological and religious context.

Referring to Robertson’s faith-based prediction, Miller comments sardonically: “That the statement was a little crass does not make it wrong. Certainly no other worldly factor can account for that amazing win, which no human pollster could foresee, and which no mortal has been able to explain in rational terms.”

Miller, a professor of media studies at New York University and a frequent political commentator on radio and TV, makes a compelling case that virulent antidemocratic forces fueled by religious fervor are making an all-out assault on American democracy, but to my mind the most troubling aspect of *Fooled Again* is its indictment of the media, democracy’s watchdog, which are letting it happen.

This is the part of the story that hits home hardest for me and pushes the crisis into “oh my God” mode: the institutions that are supposed to be protecting us for the most part simply aren’t. On one hand we have what Miller calls the “Christo-fascist right,” a determined army of zealots who have nothing but contempt for secular, pluralistic, tolerant and democratic American society and feel called upon by a higher power to subvert it; on the other hand we have a meek and blandly “balanced” punditocracy that refuses to stand on principle or seriously challenge the right.

Consider, for example, how prominent members of the media covered the heart-stopping news that Al Gore did indeed win Florida, and hence the presidency, in 2000, according to a recount commissioned by the media themselves. The *New York Times*, for instance, not only buried the news in paragraph 14 of its November 12, 2001, story headlined “Study of Disputed Florida Ballots Finds Justices Did Not Cast the Deciding Vote,” but phrased it with such glib dismissiveness (“In a finding rich with irony . . .”) that a reader needed several passes through the verbiage to grasp what was being said.

Here’s the heart of the *New York Times* story: “An approach Mr. Gore and his lawyers rejected as impractical—a statewide recount—could have produced enough votes to tilt the election his way, no matter what standard was chosen to judge voter intent.”

Come again? If Gore had recounted all the votes he would have won? The paper’s point of view seems almost extraterrestrial in its indifference to these findings. Want a good laugh, America? Gore blew it! The *Times* betrays not the least concern that the voters who cast their ballots for him, not to mention the democratic process itself, are also interested parties, who, according to the apparent rules of this preposterous game, are hostage to the candidate’s choice of legal strategies. This story was not written on their behalf.

“The voices of sanity were few,” writes Miller, speaking of the coverage of the 2000 recount fiasco, “and even fewer those sane voices that spoke with the requisite bluntness.”

What we have in this country are media that believe in nothing, and are therefore ripe for manipulation by zealots who believe utterly in themselves. Miller puts the zealots’ movement into historical context:

If the Soviet threat was dangerous to this country, so too were the consequences of its disappearance. When that occurred, surprisingly, in 1991, that old crusading animus, all stoked up but with no place to go, exploded here, affecting U.S. politics and culture with a kind of blowback not envisioned by the CIA. The disaster started with the evangelical crusade against Bill Clinton and continues with the full complicity of Bush & Co., whose soldiers now crusade against their fellow citizens—and against democracy itself.

Most of the book is documentation of this phenomenon. Miller collected news accounts from all over the country of the irregularities and wholesale disfranchisement that occurred on November 2, 2004, culminating in the reelection of George W. Bush, which, though foreseen by Pat Robertson, statistically was at outrageous variance with state-of-the-art poll results, especially in such swing states as Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania and New Mexico. How did this happen? *Fooled Again* is an exercise in dot-connecting, a mosaic of isolated answers gathered together to reveal the larger pattern. For instance:

- “In South Carolina, a posse of Republicans converged on Benedict College, a black institution in Columbia, demanding to see drivers’ licenses and challenging the right of several dozen people, mostly students, to cast votes. . . . Some of the students left in tears, according to . . . the college president, who also noted that the operation slowed things down so much—there was a four-hour wait at one point—that would-be voters had to call it quits.”
- “The Republicans were especially active in South Florida, doing all they could to frighten Kerry voters into going home, or staying home. This sort of intimidation was already going on throughout the early-voting period. The early voters [in a predominantly black section of Jacksonville] . . . found themselves under surveillance as they came to cast their ballots, a private detective filming everyone from behind a car with blacked-out windows.”
- “Forty-three percent of expatriate voters, or would-be voters, never received their ballots or received them too late, according to the Overseas Voting Foundation. . . . While thousands of expatriates had no way to vote for president, the military had a great surplus of write-in ballots—enough to give each service member two. . . . According to [a high-ranking officer in the military], the Pentagon is uninterested in helping ‘non-propagandized people’ vote.”

The point is that these are not isolated incidents. Many precincts around the country—especially in minority and student areas—were plagued with troubles: “epidemic dysfunction” . . . “statistically impossible bad luck” . . . “reminiscent less of democratic process than of martial law.” There were too few voting machines; the machines broke down. Republican challengers and poll watchers were rude and intimidating. Voters were directed to the wrong polling places, the wrong lines. People tried to vote for Kerry and their machines registered Bush. This happened over and over and over.

These antidemocratic machinations are not a conspiracy in the normally understood, easily dismissed sense, anymore than the Jim Crow South of yesteryear was a conspiracy. Most of the tactics are out in the open or, at best, thinly veiled. They have the enthusiastic participation of ordinary, everyday Americans who believe that they're doing what they must.

“The project here is ultimately pathological and essentially anti-political, albeit Machiavellian on a scale, and to a degree, that would have staggered Machiavelli,” writes Miller. “The aim is not to master politics but to annihilate it. Bush, Rove, DeLay, Ralph Reed et al. believe in ‘politics’ in the same way that they and their corporate beneficiaries believe in ‘competition.’ In both cases the intention is not to play the game but to end it—because the game requires some tolerance of the Other, and tolerance is what these bitter-enders most despise.”

Fooled Again is a wake-up call. Just because the mainstream media—and the mainstream Democratic Party—refuse to be appalled and can at best summon an occasional and perfunctory defense of democratic principles, doesn't mean the danger isn't real. If we want our children to inherit a free, democratic and open society, the time to start rebuilding it is now.