



CITIZENS IN THE RAIN

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"Where there is a free press the governors must live in constant awe of the opinions of the governed." - Lord Macaulay (one of many stirring quotes on the sacred role of the Fourth Estate adorning the lobby of the Chicago Tribune)

My fantasy of the mainstream media actually doing their job, and living up to the words they carve in marble to describe their own importance, is an 80-point (Terri Schiavo- or even Pope John Paul II-sized) headline running across the top of tomorrow's paper: ELECTION RESULTS IN DOUBT.

That would stop a few hearts. But the nation's major newspapers, even as they struggle with declining readership, have no intention of being quite that relevant to their readers - no intention, it appears, even to begin the process of looking into the hornets' nest of vote fraud allegations abuzz in meticulously researched reports on electronic voting (see uscountvotes.org) or the voluminous Conyers Report on what happened in Ohio on Nov. 2 (see truthout.org/Conyersreport.pdf).

Isn't our democracy at stake? Doesn't that matter?

"If John Kerry and the Ohio Democratic Party and all the other folks who had the most to gain from the election were making this challenge, I would get interested. But when the people with the most at stake don't step up, I'm suspicious."

So Don Wycliff, the Chicago Tribune's public editor, wrote to me in an e-mail exchange a few days ago, explaining why he, if not the Tribune itself, had no intention of investigating the issue with any seriousness.

It followed a strange breach in the Tribune's deathly silence on the irregularities of the 2000 and 2004 elections, which came about after readers began bombarding the Tribune with mail suggesting they run a column I had written, "The Silent Scream of Numbers," addressing these irregularities and reporting on a national election-reform conference in Nashville last month.

My column didn't run, but Wycliff wrote a column, "When Winning Isn't Everything," dismissing their concerns and telling them to ponder the moral leadership of Richard Nixon, who patriotically swallowed his close defeat in 1960

without complaint. In others words, shut up and get over it.

Wycliff was speaking only for himself, not "the media," but because his column was one of the few pieces to appear in a major publication even acknowledging that a huge number of Americans are distraught at mounting evidence of large-scale disenfranchisement in 2004 (and no guarantee that 2006 and 2008 will be any different), his words, by default, have special resonance. They stand in for the prejudices of the media as a whole.

Of all my objections to what he wrote, his contention that Kerry has the most at stake in all this is the most dispiriting, and most reflects the wrongheaded, "horse race" coverage of elections the media have shoved down our throats for as long as I can remember.

In his column, Wycliff even used a sports analogy, pointing out that "it's not the pregame prognostication and expert opinions that count, but the numbers on the scoreboard after the contest has actually been played." The Bush team won; the Kerry team lost. And the voters must be the equivalent of sports fans then, either jubilant or disappointed when the game is over, but couch potatoes either way, not participants.

Anyone else just a little bit offended? As one of the hundred or so readers who responded to the column (and cc'd me) put it, "Winning isn't everything, but fair elections are everything."

Nearly a week after Wycliff's column ran, the Tribune has printed only one letter in response to it - and this letter was about Nixon. It didn't have a word to say about the 2004 election. So much for my naïve optimism that an actual debate would ensue on the pages of the Trib.

Once again I quote exit-poll analyst Jonathan Simon: "When the autopsy of our democracy is performed, it is my belief that media silence will be given as the primary cause of death."

The stakes are getting higher and higher. Could it be we can't have election reform without media reform? The "respectable press" refuses to confer the least legitimacy on the citizens who are questioning this election and demanding accountability in the voting process.

How do we make them care? How do we make them look for themselves? How do we make them stand outside with us in the rain, waiting to cast our ballot for democracy?

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