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**COMMENTARY:
FIGHT STEALTH TOTALITARIANISM**

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COMMENTARY:

FIGHT STEALTH TOTALITARIANISM

The word totalitarianism conjures up images of Soviet tanks on the streets of Budapest or Prague. But, as Hannah Arendt showed us years ago in her seminal work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, totalitarianism may develop more slowly and subtly.

That's exactly what's happening in the United States, as we experience and accept the weakening of the rule of law, the reliance on torture, and the mainstream media's abdication of its role as a critical, independent voice. Worse, the symbol of the rumbling tank has been replaced by an insidious stealth weapon: the ballot, the very symbol of our democracy.

The right to vote is a fundamental tenet of democracy and the Constitution. But look at what happened in the past two presidential races.

The 2000 presidential election wasn't decided by the ballot, but by Republican election officials in Florida. On election night, TV analysts looked at the exit polls and declared Al Gore the winner. Then suddenly Bush was declared the winner in Florida by about 500

votes. In the ensuing recount, we learned that thousands of votes in Florida were disallowed or not counted, thanks to "hanging chads" and the work of a Republican party led by Governor Jeb Bush. And when Gore sued for a Florida recount, five Republican appointees to the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that our democracy was too fragile for that. Hence, President Bush II.

In 2004, it was déjà vu all over again. Only this time it was new "high-tech" voting machines that undercut the right to vote, and the state was Ohio, not Florida. Amid widespread complaints of voting irregularities in Ohio, Congressman John Conyers asked the non-partisan General Accounting Office to investigate the voting machines. The machines are all privately owned, and many are owned by Warren O'Dell, who – according

to the Free Press newspaper – “pledged before the 2004 campaign to deliver Ohio and thus the presidency to George W. Bush.”

The GAO findings confirm our worst fears: problems reported throughout Election Day in Ohio could easily be the result of tampering with the new machines. Other irregularities: Thousands of Ohio voters were thrown off voter registration lists, and a shortage of machines in African-American neighborhoods made it impossible for many to vote.

Votes mysteriously disappeared after the polls closed; and an unfounded terrorist threat kept the media from monitoring the vote count in one county. Combine the possibility of fraud with the new face of Jim Crow, and it appears that another presidential election may have been stolen.

Elections are one issue. Look what’s happening to our state of government under law.

What we’re seeing now more than ever is the willingness of the government to put aside the rule of law when it obstructs the state’s political gains. Spying and eavesdropping on citizens without warrants has become commonplace, despite the Fourth Amendment. Suspected terrorists are typically held without charges, sometimes in secret prisons, and sometimes under appalling conditions. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal revealed shocking abuse, that our constitutional system cannot tolerate.

What’s the mainstream media saying about all this? Not much. Sure, there’s the occasional expose, but media owned by Time Warner,

Disney, Murdoch and General Electric are not known for their critical positions against the government. Compare the media coverage of the Florida debacle in 2000 with the fiasco in Ohio in 2004. Not much about stealing votes in Ohio. Not a peep about the GAO report in the mainstream media.

Our democracy is being eroded faster than the levees in New Orleans while everybody is busy voting on American Idol. That’s exactly the problem with stealth totalitarianism: Democratic structures collapse, the totalitarian flood washes away our way of life, and we say, “Where did that come from? What hit us? We didn’t know.”

We do know, and we must act now. Start with the ballot. Democrats, stop making nice and start suing every precinct, town and state official who turns voters away or deploys the fewest machines to the most heavily Democratic districts. Everyone should demand publicly owned voting machines with paper receipts. Demand that the polls stay open 24 hours on Election Day. Demand that Election Day become a national holiday, so people don’t have to choose between voting and their paycheck.

Demand accountability. Demand democracy!

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