

# Good news, bad news and more of the same

**FIRST THE GOOD NEWS** – As actions go, the one I'm about to report is inspirational. It reminds us of the human potential for rational logical acts of kindness and love. Just before Christmas, when most of us were engaged in the supposedly patriotic venerable tradition of floating the American economy with a seasonal credit-card-fueled bout of hyper-consumption, one small group of Americans had another idea. You see, these folks had nothing to celebrate this year. They're the families of Americans who died in the attack on Fallujah.

The Bush-ordered attack flattened Fallujah, a city the size of Buffalo, New York. And, as I reported earlier, the resulting carnage was horrific, with the Red Cross reporting about 8,000 civilian deaths. But this is a story about promise and hope. A group of families of American service personnel who died waging the assault, has raised \$600,000 in relief aid for the victims of the assault. "The Iraq War took away my son's life," explained Rosa Suarez, one of the organizers. "And it has taken away the lives of so many innocent Iraqis," she went on, "It is time to stop this killing and to help the children of Iraq." I know it's not really a cheery Christmas story, but like "Miracle on 34th Street," it walks us through hell, ultimately showing us hope. This year, amongst photos of dogs picking away at human flesh in the streets of Fallujah, any hope is certainly welcome.

On a less lethal note, there's some Christmas cheer coming out of New York City, where a federal District Judge explained to the Republican administration of Michael Bloomberg,

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that they can't demand permits from Critical Mass bicyclists enjoying their monthly rides. The judge, in making his ruling, cited a decade of Critical Mass rides with police blocking auto traffic and encouraging cyclists to speed through red lights – which was a mutual effort on the part of cops and cyclists to minimize traffic congestion. In this historic light of cooperation, there was no justification for the harassment of Critical Mass riders that transpired in the months after the Republican Convention. Following the judge's ruling, Critical Mass cyclists enjoyed their first harassment-free ride in months – on New Year's Eve. It's good to see that if we can act civil in Buffalo and have problem-free Critical Mass rides (with one highly notable exception), they can do it in New York too.

We're also talking proud when it comes to human health and the environment. On December 28th, Buffalo became the first city in New York, and one of the first in the country, to pass a resolution committing to reducing the use of products that either contain, or in their disposal, release Persistent Bioaccumulative Toxic Chemicals (PBTs). It's simple. PBTs accumulate in our bodies over the years, often either killing or crippling us. And they're present in all sorts of products such as PVC furniture, mercury thermostats and urinal mints, where safer affordable alternatives are readily available. It's not rocket science. Why poison ourselves if we don't have to? Yet, in this period in our history where we bomb cities into oblivion for no apparent reason, and where people poison their own families with herbicides and pesticides so that they can have dandelion-free lawns, Masten District Councilmember Antoine Thompson's bill is literally a breath of fresh air. It offers us hope that government can act sanely and in the interest of its citizens.

### **Then the bad news**

Of course one act of Sanity in Buffalo has to be followed by a national act of insanity. Hence, on the same day we celebrated Buffalo's lucidity, the Associated Press brought us back down to earth (deep into the flaming core, that is) with a piece about school milk containers. Written by J.M. Hirsch, it celebrates the sorry fact that "a growing number of schools are ditching those clumsy paper half-pint [milk] cartons many of us grew up with" in favor of PBT-containing disposable plastic bottles. Hooray!

Hirsch must have scoured the country to find just the right government official to get this gem of a quote from New Hampshire's Agriculture Commissioner, who exclaimed, "Those damn square containers are awfully hard for kids." Fucking A! I'm glad we're working on that problem.

The reality is, however, that the trend that Hirsch is reporting on doesn't really exist. Hirsch writes that "already more than 1,250 schools have switched" to plastic bottles.

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What he doesn't report is that there are over 108,000 K-12 schools in the U.S. Here's another fact. There are approximately 130,000 print journalists working in the U.S. And most of them are just like J.M. Hirsh. So expect lots more industry public relations releases spun into "news" stories. And since perception is more powerful than reality, expect administrators in the 106,750 or so schools not using PBT-laden containers to "get with the program" in the next five years. American school kids consume over 5.3 billion half-pint containers of milk per year. When this industry fully converts to PBT-laden plastic containers, Buffalo's efforts to reduce PBT consumption will seem like pissing into the wind. But at least we still have some piss and vinegar in us – which is more than I can say for the journalists-turned-whores who populate the Associated Press.

### **The bad wave**

Then there's the Tsunami. As acts of nature go, this one was a motherfucker, constituting one of the worst natural disasters in modern history. What was unnatural was the Bush administration's response to it. With every developed nation in the world pitching in to support the largest relief effort in history, George W. Bush offered up a measly \$35 million in aid. That's roughly what we spend every four hours in Iraq, making that desert nation look like it too was hit by a tidal wave of death and destruction. It's also roughly the cost of Bush's upcoming inaugural hoopla. To put this \$35 million dollars into perspective, we need to look at some other contributors, such as Spain, which pledged to spend \$60 million on relief operations, or Sweden's offer to contribute \$75 million. That comes out to a \$8.40 per capita. By contrast, the Bush administration offered up 12 cents in aid for each American – giving us the title of world's stingiest nation.

Of course Americans aren't really aware of this. According to The New York Times and The Boston Globe, Polls show that we believe our nation spends 24% of its federal budget on aid to poor countries. The Times reports that we actually spend about one one hundredth (1/100) of that amount. Of course Secretary of State Colin Powell took the Karl Rove approach and attacked reality head on, exclaiming on ABC's Good Morning America program that the U.S. "has given more aid in the last four years than any other nation or combination of nations." Powell also told the world unequivocally that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. For the record, The European Union offered up twice as much development aid over the last four years as did the U.S.

George Bush made matters worse, first by babbling about how generous we are, then launching this gem, explaining to the world's media that "What you're beginning to see is a typical response from America." After weathering a political tsunami of criticism, the Bush administration upped its contribution to a more realistic \$350 million, or about

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\$1.20 for each American. Bush, in his most recent weekly radio address, now claims we are “leading” an international relief coalition, “helped” by nations such as Japan (which is contributing \$500 million).

### **And more of the same news from Ohio**

And finally, there’s Ohio. The continuing investigations into the Ohio presidential vote have continued to document disturbing and inexplicable problems. First, Ohio’s Republican Secretary of State (and Bush Campaign co-chair), in his official capacity as the officer overseeing the election, certified an impossible vote count, often showing more presidential votes than voters. In one precinct that went for Bush, for example, there were 220 more votes than voters. Two weeks ago I reported other precincts (Reading S and Lexington G) having supposed turnout rates of 124%. Those numbers now constitute the certified vote – with no explanation as to how that is possible.

In one heavily Republican precinct (Concord SW), Blackwell certified a voter turnout rate of 98.5% with all but 10 people supposedly voting. Investigative reporters from the Columbus Free Press, however, easily located 25 people who reported that they didn’t vote. Democratic-leaning predominantly African-American precincts had the opposite problem. In one Cleveland precinct (C) where workers reported a record turnout with long lines all day, the official certified tally reports a turnout of only 78%.

There was a recount in Ohio, thanks to the cooperative effort of the Green Party and the right-wing Libertarian Party (neither of whom supported John Kerry). But Blackwell was in charge of this recount as well. This is sort of like outsourcing detective work to suspected murderers, and assigning them to investigate their own alleged crimes. As it turns out, the “recount” only recounted three percent of Ohio’s vote. And it wasn’t a random three percent. According to the Free Press, test precincts were selected by the bureaucrats under investigation for electoral fraud. Hence, there were no recounts in the precincts with the most suspicious results. There was also no recount in the precincts using electronic voting machines (totaling 14.6% of the Ohio vote), since there is no auditable trail to recount. It was also impossible, according to The Free Press, to conduct recounts in precincts where officials destroyed the original tabulator records. In precincts where there actually was a recount, the recounts were often conducted not by poll workers, but by contractors working for the companies under suspicion of election tampering.

The list of documented problems with the Ohio count is now quite extensive. In response, ranking minority member of the House Judiciary Committee, Representative John Conyers, is raising an official objection this week in Congress to the admittance of

Ohio's shoddily-selected electors to the Electoral Congress. Of course the objection will die on the floor, with the media portraying Conyers as a lunatic. It's important to note that even if Congress voted to disqualify Ohio's slate of electors, Bush would still win the final count as Kerry would also be deprived of the Ohio electoral votes. Perhaps this is why the Kerry campaign took a back seat in the recount struggle, leaving it to the underfunded Green and Libertarian parties to investigate the Ohio election fraud. This is not about winning the election – the Greens and Libertarians aren't contenders. This is a struggle to salvage the system – something the Democrats historically have had little interest in.

### **The underlying problem**

There will probably never be enough evidence to prove that the 2004 presidential election should be overturned. And there might not be enough evidence to document any conspiracy to steal the election. But there already is enough evidence to show some pretty damn sloppy electoral handiwork. And that's not acceptable.

With tales of electoral fraud in Ohio emerging daily, one aspect of this story still remains as the most upsetting – that's the complete invisibility of this scandal in the corporate media. True, no journalist is going to win any popularity contests reporting stories that, let's face it, are difficult to believe. But the evidence is there, the facts are well documented and easily verifiable, and election fraud certainly is newsworthy.

With similar charges of electoral fraud emerging in New Mexico, where George W. Bush reportedly won the election by approximately 7,000 votes, this promises to be a story that just won't go away – but some people are intent on keeping it invisible none-the-less.