



## After the Campaign: Civics Lesson or Boxing Match?

By Michael Gottsegen

How much attention did you pay to the presidential campaign? How much attention have you paid to the election? If you are like most Americans, you have found the latter much more compelling, and not only because it is historic. Elections are confusing for people who have only minimal involvement in politics. The candidates vie for our votes and promise us that our welfare hangs in the balance. Their appeals are coy and focus-grouped to such a degree that the campaign feels like a mechanical exercise in pandering. We are properly cynical about their sincerity and feel soiled by the unctuousness of their appeals. In the end, we are persuaded that the candidates want nothing more than the prize and that they are only pretending to want to please us - or at least to please those of us who are among the undecided and happen to live in states where the race is still too close to call.

The net result is a high level of voter apathy and extraordinarily low voter turnout. And yet now we are all collectively transfixed by the spectacle of the Florida count, recount and count again. Florida was important all along. Winning Florida was crucial to both Gore's and Bush's hopes for winning the White House. Florida has a lot of electoral votes and it was too close to call in the last weeks of the election. Could Jeb deliver "the panhandle" for his brother or would the Gold Coast Jewish Democrats win it for Gore and Lieberman? On election eve, the networks called Florida once for Gore - seemingly awarding him the contest, then once for Bush and actually declaring him the President-elect on this basis, and then at 3:00 a.m. for neither, moving Florida and the contest as a whole into the undecided column. There it has remained for over three weeks.

Oh, how we have hung on every move, on every gyration! First the machine recount, then the selective hand count, then the absentee count, and then the hand recount again of votes that were not counted in the machine recount, and the clashing protests, court decisions and appeals. Live TV covering it all - from the Emergency Operations Center in Broward County to the court hearings in Tallahassee. All culminating on this past Sunday as we waited for Palm Beach to complete its hand recount of dimpled chads and for Secretary of State Harris to certify the election returns. And the winner is....

And still it continues. Not dead yet declares Gore. Four - or is it five - Florida state courts are busy with the "contest phase" of the election, and come Friday

the U.S. Supreme Court will enter the fray, while the Florida state legislature waits in the wings ready to deliver the coup de grace. We wait. We watch. It's even better than sex - or at least better than a sex scandal.

How we watch! But why? Do most of us really imagine that the American future hangs in the balance? In Bush and Gore we have two white bread candidates who hew close to the center, one of whom will eventually preside over a Congress that is evenly split. Gridlock will protect America from either extreme. Compromise will be the order of the day if anything at all is going to get done. The republic will be safe and the American people will be free to go about their private business without having to concern themselves with politics.

America dislikes politics and politicians, and yet we are all caught up in the current spectacle: The Presidency Held Hostage - Day 22. A duel to the death. This is not about politics or civics, but about theater, sports and sacrifice. One of these two men will die. One of these two men will prevail. It is the Super Bowl in triple, sudden-death overtime. It is the seventh game in the World Series tied zero-zero in the eleventh. Like those post-season games that grab the attention of even those who would not waste an afternoon watching a single game during the regular season, the battle for Florida (and thus the nation) holds us all in its grip.

By covering political campaigns as if they were sports contests, the news media is forever trying to convince us that politics can be as engaging and exciting as any other sport. Most of the time, however, this ploy does not work and Americans who love a good contest are generally bored by politics and well understand that politics is not baseball, football or boxing. Too bad for politics. What Americans respond to in sports and find lacking in politics is the smell of the genuine conflict and the feel of authenticity. Americans believe in sports because in sports the players are forthright about their purpose. They want to win. They want it bad and play hard. They cannot win by pretending to be what they are not. They cannot win by pandering to the crowd. In politics, however, the rules are different. In politics, one wins by pretending that it is not about winning at all. One's purposes are lofty, one's aim is to do for others, one's motivations are pure and altruistic. Or so one might infer from the words of the politicians. Understandably, Americans find this tedious at best and are properly suspicious of the candidates who cannot but remind them of used car salesmen.

In Florida, however, politics has morphed into a sports contest into which Americans can sink their teeth. At this point, it is evident that winning is the thing -- perhaps the only thing. On each side the candidates are shamelessly self-serving in their selective appeals to law and to the sanctity of the democratic process. Neither side is particularly believable, but we all know what is at stake. And like a sporting contest, the outcome is not in our hands. There are the players and the referees, and even the refs often come off like partisans. The Democratic canvassing boards, the Democratic judges, the Republican Secretary

of State and the Republican legislators, partisan spinmeisters all, trading blow for blow in their quest for the gold. Go for it, team!

Because it cannot go on forever, because eventually the Nielsen ratings will flag and the fickle public will lose interest, it is necessary that this great contest come to an end. Enter the United States Supreme Court. It shall attempt to end the game in a high-minded way that eludes the charge of partisanship that sticks to every other player in the process. We need the Court to end the contest before the handicappers in Las Vegas have calculated the odds and created a betting pool on the outcome. Where have you gone Jimmy the Greek...?

Does this mean that politics is really nothing more than a sports contest and that winning alone is what counts? No. Politics is about so much more. It is about matters of principle and about shaping our collective future, and about creating a just and compassionate society and a better world. And it can appeal to our better natures, to our altruism and to our disinterested concern for the common good. But we are coming off a campaign in which neither major party candidate ever really engaged the important issues of the day in a serious way. We are coming off a campaign that seemed empty of issues and full of hypocrisy and pandering. Down deep, we all sensed that for the candidates the issues were less important than their desire to win the grand prize of the presidency. We sensed that it was really a sports contest, but the pretense that it was something higher and finer was so tiresome that we turned off and relatively few of us made it to the voting booths on Election Day. Choosing the lesser of two evils while holding one's nose is hardly an inspiring option.

Americans may be a politically lazy people, but they surely enjoy watching a good fight and Florida has given us just that. Perhaps in four years we will collectively opt for real politics instead of Gator Bowl II. That would surely be much more conducive to the republic's well-being. In the meantime, however, enjoy the game because it won't last forever. Too bad they don't sell beer anymore in the bleacher seats.

