

Prologue: Florida, November 2000

The message hit my pager about midnight. I was watching the 2000 presidential election returns on my neighbor's TV. (I didn't own a TV; I hate those things.) The men with the weird toupees who feed television "news" to the nation had called Florida for Al Gore. Then for George Bush. That's when my pager went off.

don't call DC, don't call headquarters, get next plane to Palm Beach airport. immediately. don't call us. rent car, go to Hilton.

I had never seen a page quite like that and don't believe I ever will again. I looked at the pager, then at the TV, where confounded anchors were stammering about Florida, then back at the pager. Then I put the pager down, picked up the phone, and booked the next flight to Palm Beach. Before the sun was up I was on my way.

The place I was leaving was Stamford, Connecticut, where I was running a pilot organizing project for the AFL-CIO. When you work as national staff for either the AFL-CIO or one of its member unions, you can expect to periodically get "pulled" from whatever merely urgent thing you are doing to some other thing that is actually dire. The practice can be overused by people buried in Washington offices who are convinced that everything on their desk is of utmost importance and who have forgotten how disruptive it is to real organizing of flesh-and-blood workers. But in this case, there wasn't anything more important anywhere; the presidential election was on the line.

The West Palm Beach Hilton was all hustle and bustle, jacked-up adrenaline, and frayed nerves. All the senior organizers from the AFL-CIO were converging on the place, which became the union command center in the battle for Florida. We were the Special Ops: people who knew how to hit the ground running, how to turn on a dime from one task to another, how to press the pedal to the metal and also how to wait—to “zig and zag,” in organizer shop talk. The first person I saw there was Kirk Adams, head of the AFL-CIO National Organizing Department.

“Hey, McAlevee, no, I don’t know the assignment yet, don’t talk to me, I am too busy trying to figure it out, be ready to roll when I do.”

Palm Beach County was the land of the butterfly ballot and the hanging chad. Butterfly ballots were punch card ballots with the candidates and issues displayed on both sides of a single line of numbered voting marks—an arrangement especially liable to misinterpretation by people with poor vision, such as the elderly. Hanging chads were tiny bits of paper that should have fallen out of the ballots when voters punched in their choice of candidate but hadn’t, leaving a trail of ambiguity that could be used to obscure the intent of the voter. Thousands of ballots were being discounted or contested due to this rather archaic paper voting system.

Finally, our plan took shape. Each of the senior staff would be given a team of organizers and we would start knocking on doors and collecting affidavits from people who would swear under oath that they had meant to vote for Gore but, confused by the butterfly ballot, had accidentally voted for Bush or Pat Buchanan.* Other teams were dispatched to grocery stores, and some were sent to a candlelight “protest” vigil. I was given a team of organizers, an attorney or two, a van, and a stack of maps indicating our assigned condominium complexes, mostly inhabited by senior citizens, and we raced off to collect affidavits.

It was like shooting fish in a barrel. From the first complex we hit until we were pulled off the assignment a few days later, it was hard to

* Pat Buchanan was an ultraconservative third-party candidate running for president on the Reform Party ballot line. For years he had been widely accused of being an anti-Semite, which made it particularly painful for the county’s elderly Jews to realize they had just inadvertently punched the button that corresponded to his name.

find an elderly voter who hadn't screwed up the ballot or didn't want to make a sworn statement. These places were full of funny, highly educated, cranky New York Jews. I was a New Yorker myself, with a partly Jewish upbringing,[†] and these people felt like home to me. I adored them. And they were really pissed off, especially the ones who thought they had accidentally voted for Pat Buchanan ("the SS guard," they called him). There were holocaust survivors, and sons and daughters of holocaust survivors. What's more, many of these folks had been union members in the Northeast before retiring. You would knock on their door and it was as if they had been sitting there impatiently wondering when the union would finally show up. Soon there were long lines in the community rooms, because we hadn't anticipated such an outpouring. These folks could hardly stand up, there were walkers all around, but no one was leaving until they'd all met the lawyer, told their stories, and filled in the affidavits. And they were ready to do much more than that. Affidavits? Lawyers? Hell, these people were furious.

I reported this every morning and evening at the debrief meetings for lead organizers. "So when can we actually mobilize them, put these wonderful angry senior citizens into the streets and on camera?" I would ask. But we didn't do anything of the sort. Instead, we did a candlelight vigil, which was an awful, badly organized affair, just the kind of event that makes me crazy. First, because it could have been huge, and second, because everyone who came was bored—a good recipe for how to get motivated, angry people to stay home the next time they get a flyer. But it got worse. Big-shot politicians from across the land were starting to show up, and they all came to the vigil to calm people down. It was a mind-blowing thing to watch. Were these guys idiots, did they want to lose, or what?

I heard someone from the press mention that Jesse Jackson was coming in two days to do his own rally and march. Hmm. Why hadn't we heard of that? Then, later that night, during the regular debriefing on legal updates on the recount and the next day's assignments, a higher-up said, "Jesse Jackson is coming to do a big march. We won't be participating in it."

[†] My father married several times. The woman he married when I was eleven was a Reform Jew, and I was raised with all-Jewish traditions from then until I was sixteen, when I left home.

I thought I had heard him wrong: “Um, sorry, can you repeat that?”

“The Gore campaign has made the decision that this is not the image they want. They don’t want to protest. They don’t want to rock the boat. They don’t want to seem like they don’t have faith in the legal system. And they definitely don’t want to possibly alienate the Jews—you know, it’s Jackson—so we are not mobilizing for it.”

While my heart was sinking my head was exploding. The American electoral process is breaking up like the *Titanic* and we don’t want to rock the boat?

“I’m sorry, something doesn’t seem quite right here. As the person leading a field team in largely Jewish senior complexes, and, frankly, as someone raised by Jews, I can tell you that we need to take people into the streets. We need to let them express their anger. Republicans are starting to hold little rallies demanding that Democrats not be allowed to ‘steal’ the election. We need to either support this rally or do our own or both.”

I also knew that to turn them out would require some resources, beginning with transportation from each condo complex. Most of these people didn’t drive or didn’t like to drive, which was why they lived in the condos, but that also meant they were generally home where we could find them. We had an instant mobilization in waiting; we could have 30,000 people in the streets in two days. I knew that the only outfit in Florida with the money, staff and experience to make this happen was organized labor.

What was on the table here was more than a rally. It was a question of what sort of power was going to be brought to bear on a defining national crisis. The Gore people not only wanted to project a nice image, they wanted to *be* nice. They wanted everyone to go home and hand everything over to something called “the legal process.” This was ridiculous, because when and how and where this went to court was deeply political. Al Gore himself appeared to actually believe that if he could politely demonstrate that more Floridians had voted for him than for Bush, the “democratic system” would award him the election. Gore was right in the sense that he had won the state. There were other Democratic Party honchos who were not so naïve, but they lived in a world where you deal with these things behind closed doors. They were completely unprepared for the hypercharged political street theater exploding in Florida, and couldn’t understand the difference between a narrowly conceived legal

strategy and a mass mobilization direct action strategy. They thought there was no difference.

OK. That was the Democratic Party. We were organized labor. We didn't represent the candidate. We represented thousands of union workers whose votes were being stolen, and millions more who would suffer if the whole damn election was stolen. We knew how to mobilize and we had the resources to do it. We had the Florida voter lists. We had the computers. We had an army of smart people on the ground, ready to go. And we had a base of literally millions of really angry people. We could have had buses of senior citizens chasing Katherine Harris, Florida's secretary of state and the Bush campaign's hatchet woman, all over the state—a Seniors Truth Commission of lovely, smart, appealing, telegenic elders lined up with their walkers outside every single meeting Harris was in and camped outside her house at night while she slept. Don't Let the Republicans Steal Votes from Your Grandparents. All they needed was a top-notch lead organizer and an experienced field team, a lawyer, a communications team: in short, exactly the big support we had on hand. They could have operated 24/7, like in a strike. Unions know how to do strikes, don't they?

That moment, when we could have supported the Jesse Jackson rally and didn't, could have organized something big of our own and didn't, was the turning point, the moment when the Gore campaign and their unquestioning AFL-CIO cohort snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. And by the way, it wasn't like I was a big fan of the contemporary Jesse Jackson. But Jackson could turn people out and give a good speech—the same one he'd been giving for thirty years. The fact that our choice was between joining a rally led by Jesse Jackson and not doing anything at all was beyond pathetic.

Oh, well. All that was at stake was an endless war in Afghanistan, an unprovoked war on Iraq, American torture, warrantless wiretapping, eight years of doing nothing on global warming, not to mention a relentless class war against workers and their unions, all building up to a second Great Depression. No big deal.

The rally was the next day. We were *prohibited* from mobilizing or from showing up in any union identifiable clothing, and we were discouraged from attending at all. Only 2,000 people attended, which was

not the momentum we needed (or could have generated). What made it even worse was that this was the *biggest* event in the entire debacle of what would always be referred to as “Bush v. Gore”—a legal dispute. All we were there to do was collect affidavits for lawyers. It was perhaps excusable that Gore’s political team, mired in the limitations of electoral politics, would think like that. But I was with the *unions*. The working people who go toe-to-toe with the bosses using every tool in the shed: strikes, pickets, boycotts, blockades, sit-ins, workplace actions of all kinds, expressions of international solidarity, and more. A presidential election was being stolen. General strikes have been called for less.

Karl Rove and the Republicans were not nearly as naïve. They were bringing their people into the street in an escalating series of demonstrations. They actually understood what was happening. I remember vainly pointing this out at a nightly debrief, but was reminded, as I was reminded several times a day, that Gore “didn’t want that image.”

Meanwhile, our legal game plan was sputtering along. Enough affidavits and irregularities had been found to trigger what were called “manual one percent precinct tests” in Palm Beach and soon after in Broward counties. Elections officers would randomly pull a sample of one percent of the ballots. Teams from both the Democratic and Republican parties would review each ballot and challenge the vote if they felt there was evidence that the vote had not been counted as the voter intended. If the number of challenges crossed a certain threshold, the county would move to a full recount.

When it was announced that that Palm Beach County was going to a full recount, half of the labor organizers were sent to Broward County to replicate the affidavit operation we had honed in Palm Beach, and the other half was assigned to be at the Palm Beach tables actually recounting the votes in Palm Beach. I was among the latter.

Most of my colleagues on the first Democratic counting team felt as if they were right at the wellspring of history. But counting ballots by hand was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to mobilize the base. Naïvely, for a minute I’d actually believed that we, the national AFL-CIO, might break with the Democratic Party and run our own field operation in Florida. Once I realized how ridiculous that was, that our field operation would have to operate in a vacuum of Democratic Party strategy, and that counting was where the action was, counting I would go.

We arrived for the first day of counting in Palm Beach to a mob of TV cameras—filming a Republican rally. Angry white men, mostly, and some white women, with flags and placards that said “Gore is a Sore Loser” and “Don’t Let Them Steal the Election.” Their plan was to be as intimidating as possible to those of us walking in to begin the recount, and of course to grab media headlines on their message of Gore stealing the election. It was like walking the gauntlet of Operation Rescue, the violent anti-choice group that blocks entrances to family planning clinics and harasses the women trying to get in. This was high political theater.

“The whole world is watching” is of course a cliché, but for us it was a true one. We worked in teams: two counters and one observer to a team, two teams to a table. The Democratic counters sat opposite the Republicans, with the observers on either end. The allegedly neutral observer would hold up a ballot which we counters were prohibited from touching. We were supposed to call out “Gore” or “Bush” or “Neither.” Otherwise, there was absolutely no talking in the room, and we had to maintain poker faces.

During the breaks, I tried to size up the opposition. The Bush counters were overwhelmingly young white men with crew cuts. I am blue-eyed and blond, and a crowd of white people is not something that *automatically* gives me the creeps, but these guys did. The word that came to mind was *Aryan*. In my mind I was in a world war; these were the friggin’ Nazis. Our side was quite the opposite. New Labor was as much a rainbow then as it is today. On the AFL-CIO’s Democratic team, people who looked like me were a minority.

We didn’t get to talk until lunchtime. Back at the counting tables, as we waited for someone to bring more ballots, out of the blue the Aryan across from me whipped out a camera and aimed it at me. Didn’t say a word, just snapped my photo. It took me a minute to realize that the Republicans had had a lunch meeting, too. This picture taking must have been the upshot, because a bunch of them now had small cameras, and when they thought no officials were looking they’d whip them out and start snapping close-ups of us.

At the end of the day—one of those days when you hardly breathe, when you thank God that at some point your body will just take over for you and breathe on its own—the same young Aryan came up to me just outside the counting room and started laughing and pointing with

his friends, and taking more photos. I left as quickly as I could for the evening debriefing. Somewhere in the blur of events that night we heard that Broward County was close to winning a manual recount, too. We thought Miami-Dade still had a long way to go.

The next day the Republican Operation Rescue-esque crowd in front of the counting facility was even bigger. I kept pointing this out to my higher-ups, but really I had given in to the fact that all we were going to do was count ballots, and thus ultimately we would lose. The whole carnival was surreal enough, but knowing this in my bones added a ghostly sheen to it.

As we walked in to take our seats for day two of the count, I saw the same gaggle of Aryan boys. They were staring, trying to be intimidating, but I ignored them. When I sat down, one at the table behind mine called for my attention, and when I turned he snapped a close-up of my face. I shot my hand up to get the attention of the Democratic floor leader and said, "This guy needs to stop taking pictures." But then I stopped protesting. Clearly, the crew-cut gang would do anything they could think of to stop or slow the counting. We thought Gore had actually won, so we wanted to continue, and they didn't. This room was the only place in the nation where votes were being hand-counted, and in every stack of ballots, Gore was winning. We knew it, and our opponents knew it.

After the lunch break, I noticed that each of the Aryans had a book sticking out of his back pocket. I strained to catch the title: *The Christian Militant's Bible*. That night I began to freak out about the whole thing—the stupid Democratic Party, the stupid AFL-CIO, the Aryan cult, the whole package. I was feeling very alone and needed to talk. I called my dear friend Valerie and her boyfriend up in New York City. When I mentioned the Aryans and their weird Bibles, they said James Ridgeway at the *Village Voice* wrote a lot about the religious Right and promised to get me hooked up with him the next day.

Next, Broward County hit the magic number in the one-percent precinct test, triggering a full recount there too. Miami-Dade County was beginning to look like recount number three. Shit was starting to fly in Florida; it was increasingly obvious that Al Gore had actually won the state, although no one was saying this in public. You knew it if you were on the counting teams, going to evening debrief and reviewing everything you could remember from every hanging chad you had examined that day. The Republicans clearly understood that if enough ballots were recounted

in Florida, Al Gore would be president. We were about one week into counting and two weeks past the election. We'd just had the "no one is going home for Thanksgiving" meeting. Tensions were definitely rising.

Meanwhile, the Republicans were executing all the plays the Democrats should have used. They had rallies every day in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade, angry marches demanding that the "Gore-Loser" team stop trying to "steal the elections." They had a message, they stayed on it, and they were driving it.

The next morning, James Ridgeway called to inform me that the Christian Militants were indeed a right-wing cult, a sort of softer version of the Aryan Nation. Great. I headed for the recount. Security was super tight. All the counters had to wear security badges and wait in a holding area until allegedly neutral staff were at their stations on the floor and the cops opened the sealed counting room. Just before they let us in, the Christian Militant who had been taking all the pictures of me got right in my face and said, "We know who you are. You have a horse and your father is retired and lives in upstate New York. Can't wait to photograph you today." You have to remember that this was 2000, that Timothy McVeigh had blown up the Oklahoma Federal Building just five years before. I was rattled, but I put it out of my head and walked to my table.

With Broward and Palm Beach in full recount,[‡] our sights were fixed on Miami-Dade County, where, our evening debriefs told us, a one-percent precinct test would soon begin. The Democrats and Republicans were supposed to each assign a team of two counters to the decisive one-percent precinct test in Miami-Dade. That night I got a call from Joe Alvarez, a Cuban American in the top echelon of the AFL-CIO.

"Jane, we have decided to make you one of our counters for the one percent precinct test in Miami-Dade. Hey, Jane, fucking win it. Check out of your hotel in Palm Beach, get in your car, there's a room at a hotel in Miami for you. Get there tomorrow and take everything. You are not coming back to Palm Beach, you are going to Miami with me and we are going to win."

When I got to Miami that night, I felt like I was on steroids. I sat up in the hotel alone, knowing I needed a good night's sleep and wasn't going to get it. I turned on the TV and immediately got sick of watching news.

[‡] The counting was on-again-off-again-on-again, and so on. It's impossible to list all the stops and starts. There were many.

Gladiator was on the pay-per-view movie channel. I watched it. I even watched it a few more times while I was stuck in Miami. To this day, *Gladiator* is the only blood-and-guts action movie I have ever seen.

In the morning we traveled in a van with darkened windows. We turned the corner to the courthouse and there were more TV cameras, more cops and security, and more sheer chaos than I had ever seen. But there was total silence in the counting room, under a bank of who knows how many TV cameras. It felt like those famous chess tournaments with one little table in a big room, a tense silence, and a crowd behind red ropes staring at your every twitch. We won the one-percent precinct count test.

The Republicans had clearly never considered counting ballots the be-all and end-all of their strategy, and now they launched the blitzkrieg they had prepared. They were staging actions across Florida, driving the same, well-honed message about the “Gore-Loser ticket stealing the election.” I was spending the first day of the count as a Democratic floor team leader.

As we returned from lunch, the Republicans suddenly launched their coup de grâce. We heard loud shouting and noises outside the counting room, and then a bunch of guys rampaged in, throwing tables and chairs, making it impossible to continue. Counting was indefinitely suspended. The media could talk of nothing but the “chaos” in Florida. The US Supreme Court stepped in and took the case out of the hands of the Florida court.

The Gore people were flipping out because, guess what, they hadn’t planned it this way. They’d imagined they were involved in a civilized legal proceeding, that they were going to “win the case” methodically by recounting the votes, that the law was going to keep the matter local, away from the Supreme Court where things didn’t look so good. But oh wait, the Republicans have this whole direct action thing, working in perfect sync with their legal action.

I got another call; I can’t even remember who it was.

“Hey Jane, you get to do what you wanted to all along! We need a *big* rally in Miami *fast*, because this legal thing isn’t working.”

“Um, you can’t actually make a big rally happen now. We blew it. Mass mobilizations can’t be turned on and off like that. When we landed in Florida, we could have done it, raised people’s expectations that we could

win, built the momentum, the whole bit. Not now, it's too late, the right wing has the momentum."

And then, the only coup in the history of the United States was complete.

Once you have been organizing for enough years, and seen enough efforts succeed and fail, you realize that there are "movement moments." These happen when large numbers of people are willing to drop what they are doing, forget that the utility bill won't be paid on time or that they will miss their favorite TV shows or their daughter's soccer games or their gym session or whatever, forget about how many hours of sleep they think they need every night, and go do some stuff they would never have imagined they could, like facing down cops or bosses or Aryan Republicans carrying *The Christian Militant's Bible*, or talking to TV cameras, or approaching total strangers about their concerns, or rounding up their neighbors to go to an event with something real at stake instead of the weekly bridge game. People get in this unusual state either because they are truly pissed off and there is no other option, or because for some reason the horizon of what they think they are capable of achieving suddenly expands—or, most likely, a combination of both.

Florida in early November 2000 was a such a moment: People were willing to leave their daily grind and step into history to defend their democracy, on a scale that could be called massive without exaggeration. And what a wonderful and unlikely crazy quilt of people they were.

But movement moments don't last forever, and it is much easier to snuff them out than to keep them lit. Everything depends on optimism: the optimism organizers call "raised expectations." And one key to keeping expectations raised is to respect the passions and desires of people who are not full-time organizers and political junkies, who have complicated and overwhelming lives they are trying to hold together, full of obligations they are putting aside for a moment for the sake of a collective goal.

The Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO leadership smothered the movement moment in Florida, snuffed it right out. The state was Gore's to lose, and the absolute determination with which the labor elite and the Democratic Party leadership crushed their own constituents' desire to express their political passions cost us the election.