IN NOVEMBER ONE IN FOUR AMERICANS WILL VOTE USING TOUCH-SCREEN COMPUTERS THAT CRITICS CALL A HACKER’S DREAM. COULD THE DIGITAL BALLOT BE DEMOCRACY’S NIGHTMARE?

~ BY DAN BAUM ~
It was only seven in the morning, but through the windshield of her Honda, Sandy Wayland could see that another Florida election had gone Barnum & Bailey. Voters were standing around, locked out of their polling place at the Unity church in Miami. Inside, half a dozen elderly men and women were scurrying back and forth shouting into telephones. A man mimed through the glass, “We can’t get the machines to start!” Wayland whipped out her cell phone and began punching buttons. Within minutes her fears were confirmed: It was happening all over the city of Miami. Shit, she thought, not again.

Wayland is a native Floridian whose family roots can be traced to the 19th century. The infamous Bush-Gore election 22 months earlier had broken her heart: televised images of hanging chads; aging liberals, confused by “butterfly ballots,” horrified that their vote had gone to arch-conservative Pat Buchanan; activists shouting “Stop the count!” Wayland’s beloved state looked like some kind of tin-pot dictatorship.

But her faith had been restored. Miami-Dade, the most populous county in Florida and ground zero of the 2000 hanging-chad disaster, spent $24 million on slick new touch-screen computerized voting machines to replace the hated punch cards. The two big counties to the north, Broward and Palm Beach, did likewise, throwing out punch card and butterfly ballots in favor of touch-screen voting. This election, on September 10, 2002, was the first test of the new technology. Democrats were choosing their challenger to run against Governor Jeb Bush, and Wayland was looking forward to participating in a clean, efficient election.

A sturdy brass blonde with a vise-like handshake, Wayland earns a living distributing high-end Fendi fashions to duty
free stores. Her passion, though, is politics, and like the rest of the early crowd at Unity church, she was there to vote, and she was not going to give up. So she waited. Fifteen minutes passed, then 30, then 45. People with clocks to punch or deadlines to meet drifted away while Wayland worked her cell phone. Gubernatorial candidate Janet Reno, President Bill Clinton’s attorney general, was locked out too. At poll after poll, the touch-screen machines were freezing up, failing to start, resetting themselves midvote or going dark. Wayland finally got to touch the screen of a voting machine at a little past eight that morning, but like everybody else in the three most populous counties of Florida, she doubted, given all the malfunctions, that her ballot was recorded correctly.

More than a quarter of Miami-Dade’s precincts suffered voting-machine trouble that day. The American Civil Liberties Union examined the 31 precincts with the most complaints and found that machines had lost at least 1,544 votes, or more than eight percent. In some precincts the loss rate was as high as 21 percent. (By comparison, the villainous punch-card machines of 2000 lost an average of a little more than four percent of votes.) The chilling moment for Wayland came when she realized that despite all the problems there was no chance of a recount. Electronic voting machines had done away with paper ballots that could be counted by hand. Florida simply had to accept what the machines reported—and what they didn’t report.

“Welcome to digital democracy,” says Wayland, who is now a spare-time lobbyist for a nonprofit group called the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition. Sitting at the bar in the restaurant Soyka, a North Miami island of gritty urban hipness in the sea of garishness that is upscale south Florida, she says, “We rushed into buying these machines, and I understand it. They needed a quick fix so they could say they were doing something. It’s not just Florida’s problem.”

Indeed, millions of people across the country will vote this November on machines that require leaps of faith; faith that poll workers—frequently elderly and almost always undertrained and underpaid—have set up the complicated machines properly; faith that the machines aren’t invisibly malfunctioning or losing or changing votes; faith that nobody has hacked into the software to steal the election, a childishly easy task; faith that the companies supplying the machines—two of which are run or partially owned by big-time Republican partisans and one of which was caught bribing election officials—are honest. Alas, given the vitriol of this year’s campaign and the likelihood of a close result, faith is in short supply. Americans are more politically polarized than at any time in recent memory, and the half that lost the Bush-Gore contest is fuming. No one is in the mood to give anybody the benefit of the doubt. The November election is almost certain to touch off a battle that will make the 2000 vote seem quaintly civilized by comparison.

THEORY VS. PRACTICE

In theory, touch-screen voting is a marvel. It eliminates the kind of over-vote that voided a great many Florida ballots in 2000—a touch-screen machine won’t record ballots marked for more than one candidate. If voters forget to cast a ballot for a particular race, the
In the only election since he assumed power in 1994, North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il got 100 percent of the vote. How did he do it? It's easy to be the most popular candidate when you don't have an opponent. Refugees reported that during a wave of famine in the 1990s, the government rewarded support for the military with donated food rations, while critics were left to starve. Kim routinely sentenced officials he suspected of disloyalty to prison, a concentration camp or death.

Yet Americans like to think they cherish their vote. As U.S. Representative Todd Akin, a Republican from Missouri, puts it, “The right to vote is one of our most sacred rights, the one through which all sacred rights, the one through which all others and freedoms and freedoms and freedoms are secured.” Of course, most Americans can’t be bothered to exercise that right most of the time. And sadly for those of us who do, we have never as a nation placed a high premium on running elections correctly. Electronic voting machines are worrisome in the context of a concentration camp. They are malfunctioning. In nearly Orange County, a Los Angeles Times report estimated that machines gave as many as 7,000 people incorrect ballots; in 21 precincts they recorded more votes cast than registered voters. In northern California’s Alameda County, a voter card glitch disabled the touch-screen machines in some 200 polling places. In Maryland, Senator Barbara Mikulski, a Democrat, didn’t appear on electronic ballots in at least three counties in the March primaries (she won anyway). The list goes on.

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vote to simple counting machines? Congress would have done well to watch Miami-Dade, which, as the epicenter of the 2000 election, took the lead, converting entirely to touch-screen machines in early 2002, months before the nation had to.

“Everyone was so eager to fix the problems of 2000,” says Miami-Dade county commissioner Jimmy Massey. “We got fascinated with a new toy and had a rash this technology.” By the time Miami-Dade decided to buy in September 2002, Congress was well along in crafting the Help America Vote Act. The month after the Miami-Dade debacle, the federal bill passed, directing $3.9 billion to states to replace chad-ridden punch card machines and other outdated technology. Though the law didn’t mandate electronic machines, it ignored the Flares going up from Miami and allowed counties from the Florida Keys to Puget Sound to spend federal dollars on shakier technology. Nearly every county in Nevada, Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey, Delaware, New Mexico and Maryland, as well as a majority in South Carolina, Tennessee and Indiana and a smattering of counties elsewhere, have gone to touch-screen electronic machines. About one in four voters nationwide will use them this November. They can only do so well to consider the experience of Miami-Dade. This steamy, palm-studded county—sometimes known as the capital of the Caribbean for its rich immigrant culture—presents an object lesson in sudden transitions to the complicated new voting technology. Like the Titanic, the machines went haywire on their maiden voyage.

Miami-Dade’s star-crossed journey to the touch screen started in May 2001, when the Florida legislature—burned by the Bush-Gore imbroglio—banned punch card voting statewide. The county invited vendors to compete for a huge contract: 7,200 new voting machines, the single biggest voting-machine purchase in U.S. history. Miami-Dade wanted either touch-screen or optical-scan machines (at which voters fill in bubbles with a pencil, SAT-style, on a card that a computer then reads), and the technology had to meet a long list of criteria for accuracy, auditability and backup. In the superheated aftermath of Bush-Gore, the county was forced to choose among three corporations of questionable character and impartiality. Diebold, Ohio-based and publicly traded, makes automatic teller machines and other self-service electronics; in addition to vote counters. Its CEO, Wally O’Dell, has been a major fund-raiser for the Ohio Republican Party; last summer he got his rep tie caught in a wringer when he wrote that his company was “committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to the president next year.” Diebold’s president, Bob Urosevich, is the brother of Todd Urosevich, a founder and current vice president of Diebold’s main competitor, ES&S, a closely held Nebraska-based maker of voting machines. ES&S processed almost all the votes for the 1996 election of Republican senator Charles Hagel of Nebraska. Earlier that same year he had also served as chairman of ES&S’s parent company, the McCarthy Group. He had also served as chairman of ES&S and as the president of ES&S’s parent company, the McCarthy Group. He had also served as chairman of ES&S and as the president of ES&S’s parent company, the McCarthy Group.


from 1990 to 1995 and still retains an estimated $1 million to $5 million stake in McCarthy. The third company, Sequoia Voting Systems, is an Oakland, California–based subsidiary of the British firm De La Rue, which markets automated “tamperproof” technology and also prints currency for 125 countries. A top Sequoia executive was indicted in Louisiana in 2001 for “conspiracy to commit money laundering and mail fraud.” He had allegedly induced officials to use his company’s machines. (The charges were dropped in exchange for his testimony against Louisiana’s state commissioner of elections.) In Miami a colorful cast of characters acted out the voting-machine drama. The man ES&S hired to shepherd its bid through the local political process was an unscrupulous, theatrical 43-year-old Cuban American attorney named Miguel De Grandy. Lithe and urbane, he wears his longish gray hair back from a widow’s peak. His grandfather was an opera star in Cuba, his father a famous stage actor-murderer the Batista years, and De Grandy has inherited their stage presence. One might imagine him in his office high above downtown Miami, De Grandy tells me a complicated story of absentee ballots, a tie, a mechanical recount of punch card ballots, a missing vote for him and a missing vote for his opponent. De Grandy insisted on a hand recount, in which the missing votes were found—both with hanging chads. “My hanging chad closed, his opened. He got the vote,” De Grandy says with a rueful laugh and a whaddaya-gonna-do-about-it shrug. Twelve years later, however, De Grandy successfully argued before the state canvassing board that the hand recounts in Bush vs. Gore should stop.

“Was 2000 a high moment of representative democracy? No,” De Grandy says. “But it was a high moment for the democratic institution of voting? Yes. The system functioned. We determined peacefully who would be the most powerful person in the world.”

By De Grandy’s telling, ES&S was not particularly eager to sell Miami an electronic fix. “The ES&S position was, ‘We’re not saying it’s the best way to go, but if you want us to produce the new machines, we’ll do it,’” he says. De Grandy helped persuade Miami-Dade’s supervisor of elections, David Leahy, to recommend the company’s iVotronic touch-screen machines at a total cost of $24 million. County commissioners and the county manager approved a contract about seven months before the 2002 primary.

The iVotronic is a horizontal rectangular box with a 15-inch touch-sensitive color screen. Given its $3,000 price tag, it is laughably underpowered. Its brain is an Intel 386 processor running at 25 megahertz, with one megabyte of memory—technology that was current around the time Bill Clinton became president. (By comparison, you can now buy a computer running a modern Pentium 4 chip.)
at 100 times the megahertz with 128 times the memory for about one fifth the price.) Unlike consumer computers that can be upgraded, all of the iVotronic’s components are soldered into place, making it unimprovable.

The iVotronic design may have been up to the task as originally specified, but no sooner had the ink dried on the contract than Miami-Dade’s requirements began to change. The county insisted the machines be able to display ballots in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole, widely spoken in 60 of Miami-Dade’s precincts. ES&S said the machine could easily display two languages, but three would require a change from a text-based system to a bitmapped, or graphics-based, one. According to a county inspector-general’s postelection report, ES&S didn’t tell the county that if the machines were bitmapped their early-1990s brains would take from eight to 70 minutes to boot up. Thus were the seeds of disaster sown. For various technical reasons, machines on Election Day also had to boot sequentially, which caused some polling places to open hours late.

Bud Gillette is a 72-year-old retired Army colonel with a fluffy shock of white hair and the air of a man who expects things to be done right. His wife, Marta, the daughter of a Chilean army general, is no more willing to suffer fools. They are patriotic retirees who often volunteer as poll workers, and they have long been appalled by the quality of their Election Day colleagues. “I remember one woman trying to sell Avon products to the people coming in to vote,” Bud says. “The federal government kicked in money for technology but not to pay poll workers.”

For all the bloviating about the sacred right to vote, counties have long had to scrape up volunteers, from the amiably inept to the desperate, to run the polls. In 2002 Miami-Dade poll workers got $80 for what was frequently an 18-hour day. Some couldn’t speak English, despite a county law that poll workers be fluent. Some were illiterate. Some were drunk. Many slept through the training. Even sober, literate, English-speaking retirees, who make up the backbone of election workers nationwide, were visibly flummoxed by such techno jargon as “firmware,” “bitmap” and “PEB data acquisition device,” according to the Gillettes. Consigning the management of the vote to poorly trained, underpaid temps is a disturbing expression of our national priorities; imagine staffing air traffic control or the Internal Revenue Service that way. When poll workers had only to hand people a punch card and a stylus, their endemic inadequacy was painful enough, Bud says. When the high-tech machines were adopted, everything fell apart.
The Gillettes were working in the county building, in a giant room with 200 phones, where the returns would eventually be reported. “The polls opened at seven,” Bud says. “At 7:02 the phones started ringing, and they rang and rang.” Barely trained election workers didn’t know how long the machines would take to boot. They mistook the glacial pace as a sign of malfunction and, panicked by crowds banging on the doors, kept stopping the process, setting machines back to square one. The crew at one polling place spent three hours trying to plug its machines into a socket that turned out to be dead. Where the machines did work, voters pushed the button for an English ballot and got Spanish. Blind voters weren’t able to make the audio components work.

“We were working four phones at once,” Bud says. “There was an ES&S guy with us in a frenzy. We’d been told in training never to touch the batteries, but three hours into this the ES&S guy is telling people to take the batteries out of the machines, which they didn’t know how to do. It was a nightmare.”

Marta ventured out to a chaotic polling place at a fire station. “We had signed up 2,500 people to vote and at the end of the day found the machines had recorded 60 fewer votes,” she says. These presumably are among the 1,544 lost votes the ACLU calculated. In addition, the Democratic Party compiled a list of problems including some 500 people turned away from a single polling place in predominantly black Liberty City because the machines wouldn’t start. In 36 precincts iVotronics were still not working seven hours after the polls opened. Governor Jeb Bush, the president’s brother, had said before the election that Florida had “resolved” its voting problems and that “other states ought to look at this as a model.” Surveying the wreckage of the 2002 returns, he blithely said, “What is it with Democrats having a hard time voting?”

**OWING THE MACHINES**

Last November the state of Maryland hired a merry band of professional hackers to see how much mischief they could cause with the Diebold touch-screen voting machines it was preparing to use in the March 2004 primaries. A group of eight computer scientists, some of whom had experience at the National Security Agency, assembled on a cold January day at the offices of RABA Technologies, a computer consulting company based in Columbia, Maryland. The state sent six machines and a server like the ones that would be used to gather votes from multiple precincts on election night. The equipment was arranged in a big conference room to be as much like an actual polling place as possible, and a squad of genuine poll workers were recruited to run things. Then the fun began.
Mark McIarnon, at 24 the youngest of the hackers and an RABA employee, came prepared. Having seen a lock on the front of the machine, he had Googled “how to pick locks” and found the MIT “Guide to Lock Picking” website. Then he’d wandered around Washington, D.C. locksmith shops, passing himself off as a member of the trade until he found someone willing, with a wink and a nod, to tell him where he could buy the kind of lock-picking set in a zippered case that spies always use in the movies. It turned out he needn’t have bothered. When he got into the voting booth mock-up and examined the lock closely, he found it so simple he was able to spring it open with a straightened paper clip and a shirt-clip from a ball-point pen. Opening the locked panel took him 10 seconds. What he found behind it was an ordinary PS/2 computer port, a hacker’s portal to paradise.

McIarnon had something up his sleeve—literally: a small, flexible computer keyboard, available at any Best Buy or CompUSA store, of the type commonly used with personal digital assistants. He snaked it out of his jacket without the poll workers seeing, plugged it in and pressed the F2 button. Instantly the screen displayed all the controls a certified system administrator would see. “I was at that moment in complete control of the machine,” he tells me with an incredulous laugh. With a couple of silent keystrokes he was able to wipe out all the votes in the machine’s redundant memory banks. One of his colleagues later found that with a little more effort he could actually change the vote counts.

Once McIarnon learned that only one press of a keyboard button would give him control of the entire machine, he took an ingenious step to make it even harder for a poll worker to catch him. He marked the sleeve of his jacket where the F2 button was so he could press it without even taking it out. “Nobody would know anything had happened until the end of the day,” he says.

Cries of “Holy shit!” and “Hey, get a load of this!” rang out in the room. Bill Arbaugh, a computer-science professor at the University of Maryland who had been pressed into service as a test hacker, began tinkering with the server—which in a real election gathers all the votes from many polling places. Suddenly his jaw fell open: The server used a plain-text password instead of an encrypted one. Anyone eavesdropping on the server, which is easy, could discover it. “Once I had that, I could upload new results or additional votes. With the password, we were able to break into the server completely. ‘Owning the machine’ is what we call it. That could have been the server counting all the votes in a county or even an entire state.

“We were trying to think, Who is going to break into the system—
teenagers or a well-funded organization?” he says. “We expected a well-funded organization. You can expect someone to throw $100,000 at rigging an election. It’s not inconceivable.”

But some of the hacks were so simple they cost nothing at all. It took Matt Bishop, a professor of computer science at the University of California at Davis and another member of the hacker team, to figure out that a mischiefmaker could shut down the machine simply by jerking out the wires behind it. “That wouldn’t erase the votes inside, but it would kill it for the rest of the day,” says Bishop. “The only way to restart it is to open it, which is typically illegal on Election Day. We call this a ‘denial of service’ attack, and it’s serious. Do this to enough machines and you shut down a polling station. If you know a particular precinct is likely to vote a certain way, you can disenfranchise it.”

Even without tampering or mishandling, touch-screen machines can malfunction. The iVotronic used in Miami holds results three ways: on a removable cassette, in a hard-wired memory bank and on a flash card similar to those found in digital cameras. Each backs up the other. At the end of an election, results from each of a poll’s machines are electronically gathered into one machine that generates a “zero tape”: a printout of all the results. (Diebold and Sequoia machines have similar redundant recording systems.) Miami-Dade’s technology division audited a sampling of the ES&S machines used in 2002 and found that the records often didn’t agree. Certain machines didn’t show up on the zero tape. Sometimes a machine that didn’t exist showed up on a zero tape. In one case, 58 votes kept mysteriously appearing and disappearing. The division director concluded that “there is/are a serious bug in the program(s) that generate these reports, making the reports unusable for the purpose that we were considering (audit an election, recount an election and, if necessary, use these reports to certify an election).”

In May the state discovered that the flash-card backup didn’t work; thus every one of Miami-Dade’s 7,200 voting machines will have to be manually plugged into a laptop to verify results. “Right now we’re doing some time- and labor-intensive studies to see how long that will take,” Constance Kaplan, Miami-Dade’s new supervisor of elections, tells me on the phone. I suggest this may be one breakdown too many and remind her that County Commissioner Jimmy Morales remarked to the commission that the touch-screen machines could be like New Coke, one of the biggest marketing mistakes in history. “Coke said, ‘This is a mistake. Let’s pull the plug,’” Morales said, proposing that Miami-Dade do the same with the touch-screen machines. “I have an August election!”
Kaplan gasps. "It would be very hard to change." Then, in a decidedly whistling-past-the-graveyard tone, she says, "Our voters are comfortable with the technology."

The full story of Miami-Dade’s catastrophic 2002 election is known by one man, David Leahy, supervisor of elections at the time. "I don’t want to talk about this anymore," he says when I call him at his new job in the county manager’s office. "I’m not going to jeopardize my job. I don’t want to go on the unemployment line." But Kaplan, his replacement, agrees to see me, so I drive out to west Miami to meet her. A big woman with a halo of stiff blonde hair and an American flag pin on her caftan, Kaplan worked in the Chicago elections department from 1968 until last year. (When election-reform activists talk about her being brought in to clean up Miami elections, they invariably mention Chicago with a cynical roll of the eyes.) Among Kaplan’s office decorations is a big wooden Cook County ballot box of a type frequently found on election night—at least—at the bottom of the Chicago River. She also has one of the audio-equipped iVotronics and invites me to try it.

"For English, press the up arrow," it tells me. I press the up arrow.

"For English, press the up arrow," it tells me again, so I press the up arrow again.

"For English, press the up arrow," it says a third time, at which point Kaplan’s assistant shoves me aside, bangs on the iVotronic as if it were a pinball machine and gets it to work. Then I touch the screen in the box next to the fictional candidate of my choice; an X appears in it. I try to vote for two candidates and the machine flashes a warning that I can vote for only one. I press the flashing red VOTE button and the machine says my choice has been recorded, a vaguely unsatisfying climax for someone accustomed to the reassuring thunk of a ballot card dropping into a box.

"I get high on democracy," Kaplan shouts across her desk.

The historically low levels of voter turnout don’t strike her as all bad. "A lot of times apathy is acceptance," she booms. "When people are unhappy, they’re more likely to vote." As for the new machines, she cites a Miami Herald poll that found that 70 percent of voters were confident their vote would be counted correctly. Of course, that means almost a third lack the most basic faith in U.S. democracy.

"A lot of people have bad feelings about what happened in 2000 and 2002," she says, taking a mint from the bowl on her desk. "Whatever we can do to address that is not going to make their anger go away." Since the 2002 primaries, Kaplan has run about 30 small elections in the county without comput-
or glitches, she says, and she is confident November will run smoothly. "The same people complaining now about touchscreen machines are the people who complained then about punch cards," she offers in a put-upon tone. "Those people who are concerned about computers are going to continue to be upset. There's nothing I can do about that."

It's true: All voting technologies have problems. Hand-counted paper ballots can be lost or forged. Ballot boxes are mislaid, stuffed or stolen. In an election in which one candidate has a commanding lead over another, a small rate of error doesn't matter. But with the country as politically riven as it has been since 2000, a minuscule irregularity can throw an election and send everybody to the barricades.

Michael Wertheimer, a former National Security Agency officer who ran the team of Maryland hackers, says that U.S. election officials, in their rush to electronic technology, have waded in over their heads. "You have customers—election officials—who don't know shit from Shinola about security, and vendors who are going to build only exactly what the customer wants, so nobody does anything about security," he says. Worse, he adds, there is no oversight of the process. "Fundamental infrastructure in this country is all regulated. We look to the Food and Drug Administration to keep our food safe, to the Federal Communications Commission to watch the airwaves, to the Federal Aviation Administration for air travel. For some reason, we don't do that for voting, which is the most important thing we do."

PAPER BALLOTS?

Activists are pushing for what they call a voter-verified paper ballot—a paper record of a voter's choices, which would spit out as soon as a voter finishes, like an ATM receipt. The voter could check to make sure the machine had recorded each choice correctly and, if so, could then drop the ballot into a box. In the event of a hair's-breadth election, the paper ballots would serve for a recount. (To eliminate opportunities for tampering or box stuffing, the ballot could appear for verification behind a glass window and remain untouched by human fingers.) U.S. Representative Robert Wexler, a Democrat from Delray Beach, Florida, is suing the state to require such backup paper ballots. While it's true that hackers could make machines print a ballot that does not reflect the recorded vote, Wexler says such tampering could be detected. "We could sample some small percentage of the machines on election night and compare their recorded votes to the paper ballots," he tells me. "If they match up, we could declare the election clean. If they don't, we'd have to have a recount, and because the paper is what the voter verified, the pa-
per ballots are the ones that would count.”

The Help America Vote Act requires that all voting systems “shall produce a permanent paper record with a manual audit capacity” by 2006. But each state seems to be interpreting that directive in its own way. Several Florida legislators, for example, tried unsuccessfully in April to slip into an omnibus bill a provision that would have made manually recounts of votes from touch-screen machines illegal. “There’s really nothing to hand-count, since the machines don’t use or produce paper ballots,” one sponsor told the Miami Herald. This is exactly the reformers’ point: Wexler and the activists are insisting that machines should produce voter-verified paper ballots so that there will be something to hand-count. To clear up the ambiguity of the Help America Vote Act, U.S. senators Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Bob Graham of Florida, both Democrats, introduced a bill in March that would explicitly require all voting systems in the nation to generate paper ballots, but any such law is a long way off. Nevada is the only state that will have touch-screen machines with voter-verified paper ballots in November.

On election night 2002, county manager Steve Shiver was manning the elections floor on the 17th story of the hulking Miami-Dade county building. Shiver was 37, the youngest-ever Miami-Dade County manager, a die-hard Republican appointed by a Democratic county mayor. All day and night he’d been answering three phones at once, hearing reports of jammed machines, polling places that couldn’t open and elderly poll workers who couldn’t move the 56-pound iVotronic booths into place. At four in the morning, as he watched voting machines being returned, he realized some of them were missing. It was the last straw. Shiver turned to his elections supervisor, David Leahy, and told him that next time he wanted to take over the election himself.

The next time, when Governor Bush was reelected, came two months later, and Shiver threw everything he had at it, damn the expense. He drafted every county employee with the slightest computer experience to work the polls. He pressed the Miami Police Department into service to transport machines, maintain communications and keep order inside the polls—the first time anyone in Florida can remember the police running an election. Shiver had the machines booted up the night before and posted a policeman, earning overtime, outside each one polling place until daybreak. The election cost the county as much as $12 million. (The entire budget of the elections department this year is a little more than $11 million.) By all accounts the election went smoothly, and for Miguel De Grandy, the lobbyist for
iVotronic’s manufacturer, it vindicated
the machines. “We got unfairly bashed,”
he says. “I don’t think anybody can say
it’s an ES&S problem if it works well with
a huge expenditure.”

Which is precisely the point. In the
U.S. we don’t devote huge expenditures
to running elections. We do them on the
cheap.

Maybe that’s why California’s secre-
tary of state pulled the plug on touch-
screen machines in May, specifically bar-
ing four big counties from using them
at all this November and requiring 10
others to jump through hoops before
they can bring theirs back online. Is that
good news? Could be. But it sends a sig-
nal to voters in states still using touch
screens that their equipment is suspect
and their votes are at risk. Having
rushed into the arms of voting technolo-
gy that is privately held, impossibly com-
plicated and electronically dubious, the
country is looking down the barrel of an-
other November nightmare. The man
most often quoted among election-
reform activists is that legendary cham-
pion of representative democracy
Joseph Stalin: “Those who cast the votes
decide nothing. Those who count the
votes decide everything.”