

The black vote, which is growing in political importance everywhere, was one of the reasons that things got sticky in Florida. So many black people who had never voted before turned out on Election Day that their polling places were not prepared for them. That meant that they were given either

INFLUENCING THE ELECTION

Nixon & Castro: Still with us

By MITCHELL MOSS

Despite the enormous cast of characters in Florida, two unlikely figures — former President Richard Nixon and Cuban dictator Fidel Castro — will ultimately influence the selection of our next President. The final decision will be the result of forces set in motion more than 40 years ago by two of the most remarkable individuals of the 20th century.

Nixon, the 37th President, appointed the current chief justice of the United States, William Rehnquist, to be an assistant attorney general in 1969 and then, in 1971, selected Rehnquist to serve on the Supreme Court. After Warren Burger retired as chief justice, Rehnquist was elevated to that post. It is essential to understand this political pedigree in the context of tomorrow's Supreme Court hearing on the presidential case.

Before serving on the nation's highest court, Rehnquist was the director of ballot security for the Republican Party in Phoenix. Long before the Voting Rights Act of 1965, ballot security was the term used to describe the practice of limiting access to the voting booth of the other side's people. Rehnquist may be the most seasoned jurist in America with firsthand knowledge of how local election boards can influence access to the voting booth and vote counts.

Castro took over Cuba back in 1959, when Dwight Eisenhower was President, and he — or his enemies — have managed to play a pivotal role in our political life ever since.

Now, according to the words of the President-elect, George Garbage. The courts will not bow to images, and the true numbers of votes cast in Florida will not be changed by images either.

Many observers believe Castro was indirectly associated with the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and Nixon's downfall was caused in part by his reliance on a secret team of Cuban exiles who conducted the infamous Watergate break-in at the Democratic National Committee offices in 1972.

Ever since Kennedy refused to provide direct military support to the Cuban exiles' unsuccessful invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, the Cuban-American community in Miami-Dade County

A ghostly hand could elevate Bush

has been solidly Republican. The Clinton administration's decision to let Elian Gonzalez return to Cuba further energized the Cuban-American community, which turned out heavily for George W. Bush on Nov. 7.

What happens next? You can bet Rehnquist is not about to turn his back on the political party that launched his career. Rehnquist understands the vital importance of letting a Republican President, not a Democrat, pick the next chief justice. Republicans recognize that the chief justice must be a politician, or at least have political credentials; the Supreme Court is too important to be controlled by unpredictable legal professors, who understand legal principles rather than the power of po-

litical parties. There is a big difference between a professor who can count publications and a political pro who can count votes.

Rehnquist, like George W. Bush's father, owes his career to Nixon. It was Nixon who gave former President George Herbert Walker Bush his start in national politics. Bush served as head of the CIA, ambassador to the United Nations, head of the U.S. liaison office in China (that was before formal diplomatic relations were established) and chairman of the Republican National Committee during the Nixon years.

So Nixon, even though he is dead, has influence over this election. His appointee, Rehnquist, is in a position to ensure the elevation of another appointee's son to the White House. Assuming that happens, it will be Nixon's ghostly hands pulling the strings.

And who would have predicted that Castro, with the assistance of his enemies in Miami-Dade County, would have an impact on the presidential election of 2000? Castro — who has outlived Kennedy, Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, as well as his former cronies Tito and Nehru — continues to shape our political life, albeit in a thoroughly negative way.

Forget about punch cards, chads, absentee ballots and legal briefs; this election is in the hands of two political pros: Nixon and Castro. No matter where they are situated, they still manage to influence our lives.

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power and more a vote... overdue peace deal — something polls indicate a majority of Israelis still desperately want.

There are plenty in Barak's Labor bloc unhappy with his decision because it places their Knesset seats in premature jeopardy. But Barak also hopes to split Likud. Larger-than-life former Gen. Ariel Sharon is the current head of Likud and, as such, its logical candidate for prime minister.

But former Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the man Barak defeated in 1999, has finished licking his heavy wounds and is waiting in the wings for a chance at a comeback. There's nothing candidate Barak would like better than a Likud battle royal for power between Sharon and Netanyahu.

Barak is even continuing to talk with Sharon about establishing an emergency government until the new elections that would include Sharon. Barak lost his parliamentary majority just before July's ill-fated Camp David summit with Yasser Arafat and has been trying to mold a broad coalition government ever since.

But by even flirting with a temporary marriage with Likud, not to mention calling elections, Barak is also placing the Palestinians on notice. "You may not like me," he is saying, "but I'm a far better peace partner for you than Ariel Sharon or Bibi Netanyahu" — neither of whom has much faith in the Oslo accords — or the whole concept of peace with the Palestinians.

The message seems to be there already. Arafat reportedly phoned Israeli-Arab members of the Knesset on Tuesday to urge them not to vote Barak out of office.

But the Israeli prime minister must do more. One of Barak's near-fatal flaws is a stubborn unwillingness to listen to advice. Barak must open his ears to his allies and advisers. And he must make a dramatic effort vis-a-vis the enemies he wants to make friends: the Palestinians.

Maybe the time has come for the Israeli leader to get on television and speak directly to Israel's closest neighbors, either in Arabic (which he knows to some degree) or in Hebrew with Arabic subtitles, and explain what the peace options are — and the consequences if both sides lose this opportunity.

The situation requires blunt talk as well as full use of the tools for peace. As Yitzhak Rabin proved, good soldering is vital, but smart statesmanship is essential.