

# PR WATCH

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## A SHORT BUT TRAGIC HISTORY OF E-VOTING PUBLIC RELATIONS

by Diane Farsetta

When the president of one of the country's largest electronic voting machine manufacturers, Ohio-based Diebold Election Systems' Bob Urosevich, went before California's Voting Systems and Procedures Panel in late April, two people accompanied him: a defense lawyer and "a public relations consultant hired specifically to see the company through its California crisis," according to *Wired* reporter Kim Zetter.

The PR consultant, Marvin Singleton, was described during the hearing by a Diebold representative as someone who "works 100 hours a week on doing nothing more than trying to be a clear line of communication between our company" and the state. Apparently that wasn't enough.

The voting panel was deciding how to respond to Diebold's business practices in the state, including what they considered "persistent and aggressive marketing" of e-voting machines not yet certified, misrepresentation of machines' certification status to officials, and installation of uncertified software in machines in 17 counties without officials' knowledge.

The panel voted unanimously to recommend decertification of one Diebold model, the AccuVote-TSx, and to send their findings to the state attorney general for possible prosecution. Calling Diebold's

## FLACK ATTACK

Good communication skills are essential for a functional civilization. We need to be able to warn each other of danger, share ideas on how to improve our lives, teach each other how to use new technologies. Being able to clearly and effectively communicate a message is a noble aspiration. Yet, we see time and time again how PR firms, marketers, and propagandists, cloaking themselves in righteous ambitions, are using their communications skills to manipulate and deceive target audiences for their own gains or those of their patrons or clients.

In March, the Health and Human Services video news release that praised the Bush administration's controversial new Medicare law garnered *New York Times* attention. Many Americans were upset to learn that their tax dollars were being spent on a PR campaign to sell them on the Medicare law. Chances are, they'd also be upset to learn that they have been

paying to be convinced that electronic voting is safe, reliable, and the wave of the future and that Saddam Hussein was an imminent threat to US security, hoarding weapons of mass destruction, and colluding with terrorists.

In this issue of *PR Watch*, Diane Farsetta digs into the PR campaigns surrounding electronic voting—efforts to "educate" voters that also often promote the for-profit companies that make voting machines. And Laura Miller looks at how the Iraq War was sold to Americans on their dime.

With the millions of government dollars flowing into PR campaigns, there appears to be practically no oversight of what is being communicated. While some PR campaigns may be beneficial, there is plenty of evidence that government-funded public relations campaigns are taxpayer-supported boondoggles, in which the public pays for the high cost of its own indoctrination.

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actions “fraudulent” and “deceitful,” California Secretary of State Kevin Shelley went beyond the panel’s recommendations, banning the AccuVote-TSx in four counties and decertifying all touchscreen voting systems until the machines meet additional security standards. Moreover, Shelley told reporters, “I have the letter here . . . asking the Attorney General to pursue criminal and civil actions against Diebold.” *Associated Press* reported that Diebold “acknowledged that it had ‘alienated’ the secretary of state’s office and promised to redouble efforts to improve relations with counties and the state.”

## **YOUR ELECTION CRISIS IS OUR MARKETING OPPORTUNITY**

Diebold has been a particularly long lightning rod for criticism, but its dramatic fall from grace in California is indicative of the increased—and increasingly negative—attention being paid to electronic voting.

It wasn’t always this way. Consider Texas-based e-voting company Hart InterCivic’s November 9, 2000 press release. Its language now seems almost quaint (if opportunistic) in its claims to be able to save the country from the kind of election nightmares the national media had just woken up to.

“Electronic voting and reporting can be instrumental in avoiding the situation we’re seeing in the Presidential election. . . . The delay caused by the recount in Florida, as well as the tally of overseas ballots, speaks volumes about the potential benefit of an electronic voting system. If Florida had used an e-voting system, we’d know the winner already, and there would be a party going on right now in Austin or Nashville,” Hart InterCivic senior vice-president Jerry Meadows said in the release.

Around the same time, the Unisys, Microsoft and Dell companies were salivating over what their research suggested was a “tremendous market opportunity to capitalize on Unisys best-of-breed electronic voting solution,” given that around half of American voters were using “obsolete” machines that would likely soon be replaced, according to the PR trade publication the *Holmes Report*.

Unisys hired the world’s largest PR firm, Weber Shandwick, to implement “a proactive media outreach plan positioning Unisys executives as thought leaders on how their voting technology could have alleviated the election problems,” the *Holmes Report* wrote. The strategy was for Unisys to use “the 2000 presidential election controversy as a news hook,” and to seize the opportunity to launch the “Unisys e-@ction Election Solutions” product.

In its PR work, Weber Shandwick targeted “local, state and federal government professionals,” with an eye towards securing lucrative future contracts for Unisys. For media outreach, the firm developed “a news release, media advisory, pitch letters, talking points . . . [and] a video news release,” and provided “media spokesperson training” for Unisys executives.

Kicking off the media blitz, Weber Shandwick arranged for Unisys CEO Lawrence Weinbach to grant an exclusive interview to *Wall Street Journal* reporter Michael Orey. Having news of the product launch break in such a prestigious publication would “add credibility,” the PR firm counseled. The 2000 Unisys PR campaign, which by Weber Shandwick’s reckoning generated nearly one billion mentions in US electronic and print media, was considered extremely successful. Unisys, Microsoft and Dell, however, ultimately decided to stay out of the electronic voting business.

## **AS AMERICAN AS APPLE PIE**

The at-this-point undeniably sorry state of US elections, coupled with strong civil rights, disabled rights and voting rights activism, led the US Congress to pass the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) in October 2002. (One American Civil Liberties Union voting rights campaign highlighting racial disparities in voting ran newspaper ads that began: “There was a day in American history when black people counted less than white people: November 7, 2000.”)

HAVA establishes several major new federal voting requirements and provides almost \$4 billion to states to meet those requirements, which include a centralized statewide electronic list of eligible voters, provisional and “second chance” balloting, increased voter outreach and education programs, and updated and accessible voting machines. The law specifically calls for the replacement of punch card and lever voting machines and for the improvement of voting technologies.

Electronic voting (excluding one section funding a study on internet voting) is mentioned only once in HAVA, in a subsection titled “Accessibility for individuals with disabilities.” This clause requires states to provide “the same opportunity for access and participation” for voters with disabilities by providing “at least one direct recording electronic voting system or other voting system equipped for individuals with disabilities at each polling place.”

The groups that had pushed for major improvements in the country’s elections—including the American Association of People with Disabilities, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and the League of Women Voters—expressed cautious optimism that, with contin-

ued activism at the state level, HAVA could have a significant, positive impact.

Electronic voting machine and other technology companies, in contrast, saw their predicted “tremendous market opportunity” coming to pass. The same week that George Bush signed HAVA into law, major defense contractor Northrop Grumman signed an agreement with iPaper LLC for exclusive rights to license and manufacture their electronic voting systems. In doing so, Northrop Grumman joined “several other large systems integrators that are actively pursuing the elections market” at the time, including Accenture, BearingPoint, Electronic Data Systems and Unisys, according to *Washington Technology*.

There were some concerns with electronic voting voiced around the November 2002 mid-term elections. The *San Antonio Express-News* warned that, although one-fifth of the nation’s voters were already using e-voting machines, their accuracy was “still open to question.” Salon.com asked, “If the result of an important election using touch-screen machines ever comes into doubt . . . how will we bring ourselves to believe in the results?” But these stories were balanced, if not overshadowed, by reports like the *Charlotte Observer’s* “New Electronic Vote System Has Successful Debut,” and *Investor’s Business Daily’s* “Georgians Had Peachy Time Using Their New Electronic Voting System.”

With new riches on the horizon and generally positive media coverage, electronic voting companies launched upbeat PR campaigns. The Nebraska-based

company Election Systems & Software (ES&S) hit PR paydirt in March 2003 when it became a sponsor of the Declaration of Independence Road Trip. The Road Trip is a traveling exhibit of one of the 25 known original copies of the Declaration of Independence, with an estimated 2,000 visitors each day in cities across the United States. Road Trip sponsorship allowed ES&S to send its voting machines traveling across the country with one of the most powerful symbols of American history and democracy.

“Now with ES&S support, Declaration of Independence Road Trip visitors will be able to electronically cast their vote on several topics — such as lowering the voting age, volunteer public service and the environment — all with just the touch of a finger using ES&S iVotronic™ touch screen voting units,” the company noted on its website. The Road Trip “presents a wonderful opportunity for both the current and future voters of America to experience first-hand the ease of touch screen voting on the iVotronic,” said ES&S president Aldo Tesi. The release of local “voting results” provided numerous, feel-good media opportunities.

## THE RISE OF THE CRITICS

But as electronic voting became a reality for more people across the country, expert criticisms and troubling incidents multiplied.

A July 2002 report from Johns Hopkins and Rice University researchers led by computer scientist Aviel Rubin concluded that major e-voting systems lacked “even the

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most minimal security standards. . . . As a society, we must carefully consider the risks inherent in electronic voting, as it places our very democracy at risk.” Ohio’s secretary of state commissioned an independent security assessment of electronic voting machines from Diebold, ES&S, Hart InterCivic and Sequoia Voting Systems—the four top vendors. The study identified security concerns with each system, including potential vote tampering, election disruption and unauthorized access to supervisory functions. Ohio requested an extension from the federal government for HAVA compliance, hoping the extra time would allow e-voting companies to improve their machines’ security measures.

In early 2003, activist Bev Harris was able to gain access to sensitive files on a Diebold website, including electronic voting machine software code, a Texas voter registration list and California primary election results. She’s since documented 56 cases where e-voting machine flaws were implicated in miscounts. In Virginia, a 2003 school board race was called into question when voters had trouble casting their ballots for one candidate on Advanced Voting Solutions machines. Her opponent won by one percent. In North Carolina, ES&S machines lost more than 400 absentee ballots cast in a 2004 election. In California, e-voting machines in more than half of San Diego County’s precincts malfunctioned during the 2004 presidential primary. Some voters were disenfranchised due to insufficient numbers of back-up paper ballots.

Even the Florida 2000 debacle—from which the e-voting companies claimed to be able to save America—included a major electronic voting glitch. In a Volusia County precinct where just over 400 people voted, e-voting machines registered the outcome as 2,813 votes for Bush and *negative* 16,022 votes for Gore. *USA Today* reported that on election night “the decision desks of the five networks and the *Associated Press* . . . were looking at models that included the negative Gore count.” The erroneous results were responsible for early reports of a Bush win in Florida.

In less than two years, the critics of electronic voting achieved major media coverage and Congressional attention. Computer science experts, including John Hopkins’ Rubin, Harvard’s Rebecca Mercuri and Stanford’s David Dill, gave credibility to what the electronic voting industry would like to dismiss as mere “hypothetical” or “paranoid” critiques. The rapid dissemination of leaked and hacked e-voting company documents via the internet boosted media attention while calling into question the companies’ real intentions—not to mention their ability to design and implement security systems.

The mounting pressure led staunch HAVA advocates like the League of Women Voters to spend increasing amounts of time addressing electronic voting concerns. While maintaining that demands for paper receipts of each vote cast on e-voting machines are “extreme,” “unnecessary” and “counterproductive,” and stressing that their primary concerns are voter registration and accessibility, the League now devotes nearly all of its HAVA implementation web page to electronic voting articles.

Critics of electronic voting have also used public relations and lobbying to become a force that the industry has no choice but to reckon with. In early 2004, David Dill’s Verified Voting organization hired NewsMark Public Relations, a firm founded by former BBC journalist and former media strategist for the British government Mark Hopkinson. The Ruckus Society and Global Majority have worked with Denver-based lefty PR firm Cause Communications on anti-Diebold rallies. Bev Harris, of Black Box Voting, is herself a former PR practitioner. And the person who Harris recently wrote would be her choice for the “one person who lit the match” on the e-voting issue is California-based, long-time professional gun lobbyist Jim March.

## THE INDUSTRY STRIKES BACK

Shortly after Avi Rubin’s study cast doubts on the security of electronic voting systems, the “only trade association representing the broad spectrum of the world-leading U.S. IT [information technology] industry” urged e-voting companies to unite.

The Information Technology Association of America (ITAA) does media work, publishes studies and lobbies at the state, national and international levels on behalf of its more than 400 US corporate and 50 foreign IT association members. It has its own political action committee, the ITAA “NET” PAC, focused on regulatory, tax, and other legislative issues important to the computer and telecommunications industries. Accenture, Advanced Voting Solutions, Dell, Diebold, ES&S, Hart InterCivic, Northrop Grumman, Sequoia Voting Systems, Unisys and VoteHere are all ITAA members.

ITAA’s Director of Enterprise Solutions, Michael Kerr, wrote and submitted an “ITAA eVoting Industry Coalition Draft Plan” to relevant member companies. The coalition plan’s overall goals are to “create confidence and trust in the elections industry,” “promote the adoption of technology-based solutions for the elections industry,” and “repair short-term damage done by negative reports and media coverage of electronic voting.” To do so, the plan advocates outreach to media, elected officials, those “involved in the purchase decision,” aca-

demics, the general public, “international counterparts” and government contractors (in that order) to promote electronic voting as “the ‘gold standard’ to which all should aspire.” Specific proposed activities include lobbying, carrying out surveys, holding focus groups, networking at conferences, publishing “collaborative research on non-competitive issues” and developing an industry “code of ethics.”

In its conclusion, Kerr’s coalition plan stresses that e-voting companies would benefit from ITAA’s “sophisticated government affairs and public relations apparatus” and “track record of lobbying for federal funding.” Depending on the level of activities, ITAA offered to implement the coalition plan on behalf of its e-voting member companies for a total cost of \$100,000 to \$200,000, on top of their ITAA dues.

Bev Harris obtained the ITAA eVoting Industry Coalition Draft Plan and posted it on her website. Kerr subsequently played down the plan’s importance, saying it’s “just a standard trade association plan to address issues in the marketplace,” according to *Wired* news. Other electronic voting critics were able to join an industry conference call discussing the ITAA draft plan. According to call notes also posted on Bev Harris’ site, emphasis was placed on the industry becoming “more aggressive” and “more coordinated” in order to have more input into the e-voting machine certification process.

ITAA president Harris Miller is quoted in the call notes as saying that their coalition plan was careful in its language. “We just didn’t want a document floating around saying the election industry is in trouble, so they decided to put together a lobbying campaign,” he said. Later in the call, Miller gave another example of the benefits a coalition effort would provide: “Frequently . . . in a trade association, you don’t want to talk about the issues as individual companies. We have that issue right now with the Buy America Act, for example, in Congress. No company wants to act like it’s against Buy America—even though they’re all against it—so I take all the heat for them.”

In late October 2003, ITAA’s Michael Kerr told Technology Daily that the electronic voting machine companies had not yet decided whether to implement the ITAA coalition plan, but that he expected their decision “fairly soon.” On December 9, the ITAA announced the formation of the Election Technology Council (ETC).

## THE NEW KID ON THE BLACK BOX BLOCK

“We look forward to working with the members of the ETC to help this industry find its collective voice and to bring the benefits of electronic voting to every citizen,” Harris Miller said, in ITAA’s press release heralding the ETC’s formation. ETC’s founding members are Advanced Voting Systems, Diebold, ES&S, Hart InterCivic, Sequoia and Unilect. Hart InterCivic head David Hart chairs the group. ITAA staff person and coalition plan author Michael Kerr is ETC’s director.

Quoted in the ITAA press release, Hart said ETC formed just when “voters are beginning to

realize the benefits of electronic voting.” But *Computer-*

*world* reported a slightly different story. “We came

together because our environment has become chaotic,” Hart

told the publication. “We need to be able to speak as an industry in a

single voice on the areas being regulated. . . . We want to be part of the

debate and tell our industry’s side of the story. There’s a lot of misinformation.”

There were likely other reasons for the timing of ETC’s launch. The following

week, the US Senate confirmed the two final members of the Election Assistance

Commission (EAC), the federal body overseeing

HAVA implementation. At the same time, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)

held its first e-voting meeting “to gather input from election officials, secretaries of state, voting-machine makers,

computer security professionals and voting activists about how to address voters’ lagging confidence in election systems.” The EAC and NIST are to work together

to develop voluntary federal voting systems standards.

In an interview with *PR Watch*, Michael Kerr said that ETC was “still kind of formative. . . . We’ve obviously

been tracking the security debate.” But he did identify a few of the group’s priorities, including making the “state

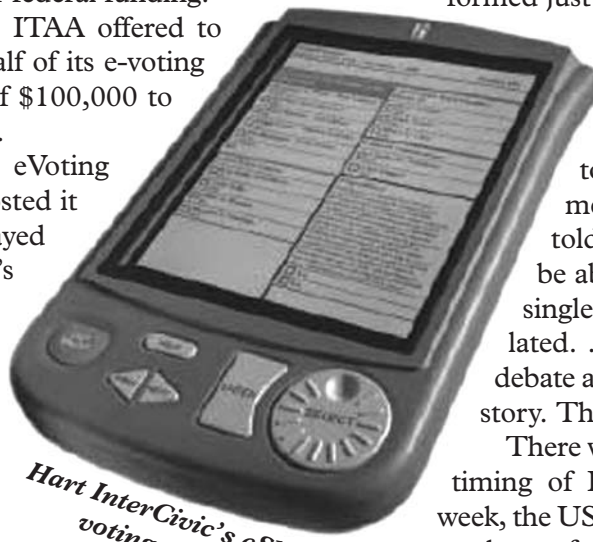
certification process more uniform and faster” and “securing a nomination” for a seat on the EAC’s 14-

member Technical Guidelines Development Committee. ETC is focused solely on the national level of debate and

policymaking, though several e-voting company members are also active on the state level, according to Kerr.

He said the ETC brings “an industry wide perspective” to the debate, free from “the marketing or sales perspectives of individual vendors,” and noted ITAA’s long

history of “active involvement in government.”



Hart InterCivic's eSlate™  
voting machine

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When asked about the claims of e-voting critics, Kerr said, “There are many things that should reassure people who use electronic voting. . . . The critics are focused on hypothetical scenarios . . . not on how the system is actually implemented.” Although “no technology is invulnerable,” he claimed, “there have been no documented security breaches with electronic voting in an election.” Others of the “many positive aspects e-voting gives to the American voters” Kerr identified include adaptability to minority languages, accessibility to disabled voters and reductions in ballot spoiling.

While maintaining a low media profile thus far, one indication of the extent of ETC’s influence came from a December 26, 2003 column in Wilmington’s *News Journal*. Written by the Delaware commissioner of elections and titled “Voting Machines Are Reliable,” the piece included a warning: “Some people are riding a bandwagon wanting receipts of their votes so they know they have been cast, and some states are obliging that trend. That opens the door for tampering with voting machines to switch and lose votes as well as ‘fix’ the paper receipts.” The column ended, “Contact my office . . . for additional information by the Election Technology Council.”

## WE’VE ONLY JUST BEGUN

On May 5, 2004, the Election Assistance Commission held its first public hearing on electronic voting. Although the Verified Voting group claimed “most speakers represent those who would not require a paper trail” and called on the EAC “to provide equal time to proponents of paper ballots,” the *Associated Press* reported on the hearing as a back-and-forth among pro-receipt (“a backstop against computer errors, crashes or tampering”) and anti-receipt (“would cause chaos . . . could drive away” disabled and non-English-speaking voters) camps. *Newsday* noted that the EAC was starting its work about a year behind schedule and “with only \$1.2 million of the \$10 million the agency was slated to get.”

Although the hearing included a “vendor’s panel,” the ETC’s “unified voice” was not heard as such. But the day prior to the hearing, ITAA “released a survey that found 77 percent of registered voters were either ‘not very concerned’ or ‘not concerned at all’ about the security of election systems,” according to *AP*.

With a relatively short timeline—states must comply with HAVA by January 2006—for major decisions involving significant amounts of money, both the electronic voting industry and its critics are sure to intensify the PR war in the months to come. ■

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## SPINNING THE “WHEELS OF DEMOCRACY”

by Diane Farsetta

Is it voter outreach and education or slick public relations?

“I can understand there being a desire to get voters familiar with it—but taxpayers are now subsidizing a campaign to increase their comfort level with a boondoggle . . . . Taxpayers are funding a corporate advertising campaign and that’s an outrage,” Linda Schade, a critic of electronic voting, told the *Baltimore Sun*.

Schade was commenting on Maryland Votes, a five-year, \$1 million voter outreach and education campaign to “familiarize Maryland voters with the electronic voting machines many will use for the first time” in 2004. The effort includes television, billboard, radio, bus and other advertising; a website; 1.5 million pamphlets and brochures; and hundreds of e-voting machine demonstrations at grocery stores, senior centers, places of worship and other public places around the state.

Maryland Votes is part of the state’s \$55.6 million contract with major e-voting company Diebold Election Systems. “We found that people are much more acceptable [*sic*] about electronic voting if they get to touch the

screen beforehand,” Diebold spokesperson David Bear told *O’Dwyer’s PR Daily*. Bear, who is identified in press releases as Diebold’s media contact, has an email address associated with the PR firm Public Strategies Inc.—a firm he represented during 2003 e-voting discussions with the state of Indiana, and one of two large PR firms currently employed by Diebold Election Systems.

Of course, it makes sense to introduce voters to the new machines before they cast their ballots on Election Day. The Help America Vote Act, which gives states a January 2006 deadline to replace old punch card and lever voting machines, mandates that states educate “voters concerning voting procedures, voting rights and voting technology.”

Nicki Trella, Maryland’s election reform director, told *PR Watch* that the Maryland Votes campaign was included as part of the state’s contract with Diebold Election Systems in order to take the burden off of local elections officials. (Diebold, in turn, hired the Florida-based Compliance Research Group as a subcontractor to run the Maryland campaign.) Under state law, counties must



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educate their residents about any new voting systems they choose to implement. But state officials felt that the Help America Vote Act requirements were too demanding for already overextended county elections boards. When asked whether the state sought additional safeguards or controls when handing over voter outreach and education duties to a for-profit company, Trella said the Diebold contract included “the normal contractual and quality assurances.” She added that “parallel outreach” was being carried out by local and state officials, “above and beyond what the vendor’s doing.”

Trella took exception to some of the media coverage of Maryland Votes. “The website,” she said, “was not in any way a response to what was playing out in the media. . . . This voter education campaign was planned way before; it was not a knee-jerk reaction,” to the increasingly negative attention electronic voting and Diebold Election Systems, in particular, were receiving. Trella also pointed out that the state had only hired a communications director to coordinate voter outreach and education efforts in February. And although that position is “recognized as being critical” to Maryland’s elections process, it’s paid for with federal funds that are only guaranteed through 2005.

What did the Maryland Votes campaign look like to the state’s residents? According to the *Baltimore Sun*, Maryland Votes billboards read: “It’s here. Maryland’s better way to vote.” The website ([www.mdvotes.org](http://www.mdvotes.org)) contains voter registration forms, an on-line voting machine demonstration and a link to the state Board of Elections website, but the site often seems more promotional than informational.

“The new AccuVote-TS, by Diebold Election Systems, blends the latest voting technology with the traditional ballot system that voters have used for years,” reads the second sentence on the Maryland Votes home page. One page still under construction proclaims in large text, “AccuVote-TS Makes Elections Easy, Accurate and Secure.” Repeatedly sprinkled throughout the extensive Frequently Asked Questions section is the sentence, “The voting process has never been easier with the state-of-the-art AccuVote-TS voting system.”

Perhaps the most interesting part of the Maryland Votes website is the “T.V. Productions” link, which plays a five-minute video news release (VNR). From the accompanying information, the VNR appears to have been produced by Maryland-based “multimedia content producer” Video Production Consulting, and to have aired on Comcast local news. The pseudo news story is filled with images of elderly voters trying a Diebold voting machine and giving glowing testimonials about how

straightforward and easy it is to use. One man compares the AccuVote-TS to a casino slot machine.

Maryland is not alone in its e-voting PR campaign. The Help Ohio Vote campaign, as originally envisioned, was a massive 18-month, \$15.3 million effort headed by PR giant Burson-Marsteller. It included focus groups, media tours, advertising, in-person machine demonstrations, direct mail and an “embedded” media program. Unlike Maryland, where one e-voting company will supply almost the entire state, Ohio counties are choosing between three different companies’ machines.

But the Help Ohio Vote plans generated controversy, due to the large price tag, the no-bid contract earmarked for a New York-based PR firm, and Secretary of State Ken Blackwell’s proposed starring role in the TV ads. Blackwell plans to run for governor in 2006, and many have expressed concern that “voter education” spots would essentially be free campaign advertisements. “This \$15 million of mostly wasteful expenditures benefits [Blackwell] personally. That is an unacceptable use of tax dollars,” one state senator told the *Mansfield News Journal*. The state legislature first blocked and then reduced the funding for Help Ohio Vote to \$5 million.

Voter outreach and education campaigns are becoming a standard part of state contracts with e-voting companies. The Texas-based company Hart InterCivic started that trend. Its website lists six “Voter Education and Outreach Websites that Hart InterCivic has designed in partnership with our eSlate™ Electronic Voting System customers.” These customers are Brazos, Harris, Tarrant and Travis Counties in Texas; Orange County, California; and the city of Charlottesville, Virginia. Although these websites all contain frequent references to Hart InterCivic’s eSlate™ machines, the informational content generally outweighs the product promotion.

That’s not to say that the Hart InterCivic websites don’t raise a few eyebrows. The Harris Votes! site explains: “Harris County is spending \$25,152,830 on the countywide electronic voting project. This price includes not only voting equipment but also long-term support services . . . and a comprehensive voter outreach and education campaign designed by Hart InterCivic and implemented by the Houston office of the international public relations firm Hill and Knowlton.”

Harris Votes! was named *PR Week’s* Community Relations Campaign of the Year for 2002. “It has been an honor working with the Harris County Clerk’s team and Hart InterCivic on this landmark project. This has been a team effort in every sense, and it’s great to receive recognition for a job well done,” said Megan Mastal, the head of Hill and Knowlton’s Houston office, in a Hart

InterCivic press release. In the same release, Hart InterCivic chair David Hart commended Harris County “for undertaking a program of this magnitude.”

Hart InterCivic says its voter education and outreach campaigns will “ensure that all voters are confident, competent and excited about the eSlate™ System when they come to the polls.” The campaigns incorporate “a wide range of integrated outreach and communication mechanisms, including flyers, videos, visual displays, Internet sources, and public service and paid commercial announcements.” Harris Votes! also included billboards which read, “The Wheels of Democracy are Turning . . . eSlate. Harris County’s New Electronic Voting System.” Many of Hart InterCivic’s outreach materials are available in different languages, including a TV ad. The English version begins: “The eSlate™ electronic voting system is accurate, accessible and easy to learn.” (Harris Votes! used Hart InterCivic’s stock TV ad; Orange County did the same, with a local official doing the voice-over and some additional outdoors scenes added.)

Earlier this year, television ads and video news releases promoting the new Medicare law were identified as possible violations of restrictions on the use of federal funds for “publicity or propaganda purposes.” In a letter to the US Department of Health and Human Services Inspector General, nine members of Congress questioned whether the production of these materials “represent an appropriate use of taxpayers’ money” and called for “a careful examination” of the matter. “The purpose of public education campaigns should be to inform and to educate, not to manipulate,” they wrote. In May, the General Accounting Office ruled that the Medicare VNRs were “covert as to source”—that is, presented as news without

any disclosure of the federal funding behind them—and, as such, violated the law.

While the particulars of the electronic voting and Medicare “public education” campaigns are quite different, the broader questions are the same. Where is the line between e-voting companies’ product promotion and damage control, and genuine voter education and outreach? Who makes the call?

Kevin Kennedy, the executive director of Wisconsin’s state elections board, told *PR Watch* that the states had pretty much been left to set their own goals and guidelines. The Help America Vote Act “doesn’t provide much direction” for comprehensive voter outreach and education activities—actually, it doesn’t require them at all—but many states saw the new mandates and funding as “a good opportunity” to launch such initiatives, he said. Kennedy explained Wisconsin’s decision to stay away from “branded initiatives” like Harris Votes! and Maryland Votes by pointing out that the federally mandated infrastructure changes alone require “lots of resources.” The question for state officials, according to Kennedy, then became: “What is the most efficacious use of our [remaining] resources?”

That’s not to say that there aren’t pressures on state elections officials to mount massive outreach campaigns. “The media companies are lining up,” Kennedy said. And the electronic voting machine manufacturers, which he admitted “do have some image issues,” tell state officials purchasing their equipment that “we’ll be there to make sure your voters are informed.”

“People should make informed decisions,” Kennedy said. But are federal funds appropriated under the Help America Vote Act going towards voter outreach and education or towards corporate advertising? It’s a question that should be answered soon, for the wheels of democracy are turning. ■



*A flyer for Harris County Texas' voter education campaign created by Hart InterCivic with PR firm Hill and Knowlton.*



# E-VOTING: DIGITAL DEMOCRACY OR A CASH COW FOR CONSULTANTS?

by Diane Farsetta

Imagine that you have billions of dollars and less than three years to spend it all. If electronic voting machine companies saw the 2000 election debacle as a “tremendous market opportunity,” the Help America Vote Act must seem like the Promised Land. Of course, salvation—or a lucrative government contract—doesn’t just come to those who wait. Enter the local political figures turned lobbyists.

At \$3.7 billion, New York’s state contract may be the Holy Grail. Late last year, “though neither a mechanism for awarding a contract nor specification for an acceptable voting terminal have been agreed to yet, lobbyists for [e-voting] manufacturers have been gearing up,” reported the *New York Times*. To boost its chances, Sequoia Voting Systems hired two in-state lobbying firms—a Republican firm with ties to Governor George Pataki and an influential Democratic firm steeped in local politics. Diebold Election Systems hired lobbyists with connections to former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani. Election Systems & Software (ES&S) hired a firm with ties to another former NYC mayor, John Lindsay.

Californians saw a rapidly spinning revolving door between e-voting interests and government. The former secretary of state who pushed for new voting machines and, in 2002, successfully sponsored a \$200 million bond measure to fund counties’ voting system upgrades is now a paid consultant for Sequoia Voting Systems, as are two of his former statehouse colleagues. The official who developed California’s e-voting machine certification process now directs state operations for ES&S. The company also hired the former mayor of Sacramento to contact Sacramento County supervisors on its behalf, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Deborah Seiler, a Diebold employee and former California chief of elections herself, remarked, “There’s no question these contacts are helpful.”

They certainly couldn’t have hurt Sequoia Voting Systems, who won the \$18.9 million contract for California’s Santa Clara County. Sequoia’s local lobbying team included the former campaign manager of the current San Jose mayor, a major local political contributor, a former mayoral aide and a former city council member, according to the *San Jose Mercury News*. In San Bernardino County, a Diebold lobbyist even served as a campaign consultant for one county supervisor, according to the *Press Enterprise*.

To win the \$20 million Cleveland-area e-voting contract, Hart InterCivic hired the former Ohio House majority leader and a former state senator as lobbyists; UniLect retained a former county board of elections

chair; and Diebold hired a former state attorney general and secretary of state, according to *Associated Press*.

In Florida, ground zero for election problems, ES&S retained the services of a former secretary of state and one-time running mate of Governor Jeb Bush. In 2001, Global Election Systems (Diebold’s predecessor) hired the former chair of Florida’s Republican Party, the former running mate of a previous governor, and a former environmental advisor to Jeb Bush, according to the *Miami Herald*. The lobbyist trying to win the \$24.5 million Miami-Dade contract for ES&S was a top GOP lawyer who worked against the recount in 2000. The Votomatic punch-card machines at the center of the 2000 Florida election debacle were, ironically enough, also manufactured by ES&S.

Electronic voting machine manufacturers have used other forms of persuasion, as well. In Ohio, Diebold Election Systems “dangled a pledge to build voting machines in Ohio if it got a statewide contract,” according to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. In California’s Riverside County, conflict-of-interest allegations surrounded a voter registrar who accepted \$1,080 in travel and lodging expenses from Sequoia Voting Systems. E-voting companies competing for San Bernardino County’s more than \$13 million contract made campaign contributions to several county supervisors.

With questions remaining about the security and reliability of electronic voting machines, and voluntary federal guidelines not yet developed, for-profit e-voting companies obviously believe that the key to success is heavy lobbying. The important question is how much these overtures will influence decisions made by under-resourced state and local officials. ■

## PR WATCH | Personals

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# OUR MAN IN IRAQ: THE RISE AND FALL OF AHMED CHALABI

by Laura Miller

The political fortune of Ahmed Chalabi, leader of the Iraqi National Congress and the most prominent exiled Iraqi to return home in 2003, appear to have gone up in smoke. After the White House-approved raid on his Baghdad home in May and charges that he gave US intelligence to Iran, and after all but the staunchest of his neo-conservative backers had distanced themselves from him, Chalabi and the INC were beginning to finally receive the public scrutiny that they deserved.

Chalabi and the INC's major contribution over the past dozen years is its vast collection of camera-ready "intelligence" concerning Saddam Hussein's human rights abuses, his connections with al-Qaeda terrorists, his stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, and the ease of transition to a US-friendly government in Iraq. But what's especially disturbing—and what calls US democracy into question—is that a good deal of the INC's "product" was financed with US taxpayers' money. Former CIA counter-terrorism specialist Vincent Cannistraro told the *New Yorker's* Jane Mayer, "With Chalabi, we paid to fool ourselves. It's horrible. In other times, it might be funny. But a lot of people are dead as a result of this. It's reprehensible."

## IN THE BEGINNING, THE CIA CREATED INC

The INC got its start in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War. With Saddam still in control of Iraq, the senior George Bush authorized a covert CIA operation to "create the conditions for removal of Saddam Hussein from power." The agency—unequipped to execute the President's "lethal finding" itself but with access to ready money—outsourced the job to the Washington, DC-based PR firm the Rendon Group, which was headed by a former Democratic Party director John Rendon. (For more information about the Rendon Group, see their entry on Disinfo.org.)

There were at least two arms to Rendon's INC operation: a London-based media campaign that publicized the Iraqi dictator's human rights abuses, and a behind-the-scenes effort to create an opposition group within Iraq that would "gather information, distribute propaganda, and recruit dissidents." Working with the CIA, the Rendon Group created an umbrella organization for Iraqi dissidents, naming it the Iraqi National Congress. The polished and charming international financier Ahmed Chalabi, who had just been convicted of bank fraud in Jordan, was a CIA favorite and assumed a starring role in the organization.

From 1992-1996, the Rendon Group funneled millions of US dollars to the INC. "We tried to burn through forty million dollars a year," Francis Brooke, who

worked for Rendon in London, told the *New Yorker's* Mayer. Reportedly, Rendon's secret contract with the CIA guaranteed the firm a ten-percent "management fee" in addition to operation expenses.

"We had a real competitive advantage. We knew something about the twenty-four-hour media cycle, and how to manage a media campaign. . . . Rendon was great at issue campaigns," Brooke told Mayer. The London office offered stories of Saddam's atrocities to British journalists. According to Brooke, when too many of the stories would get picked up by the US press, the Washington office would reprimand the London staff for violating US rules on domestic propaganda. But, Brooke told Mayer, "It was amazing how well it worked. It was like magic."

In Northern Iraq, Rendon set up two anti-Saddam broadcasting operations and provided them with media training and propaganda. Robert Baer, a former CIA officer who covered Iraq, told Mayer that Chalabi had a "forgery shop" set up in Kurdistan. But as far as being a viable opposition to Saddam, the INC's operation was "just a Potemkin village," Baer said. "[Chalabi] was reporting no intel; it was total trash."

When the operation fell apart, a deep rift developed between the INC and CIA. While both blamed each other for being ineffective, the operation's failure did not receive much public or Congressional attention. Unchecked, many of the key players stayed in the game.

## MR. CHALABI GOES TO WASHINGTON

For the next two years, Chalabi lived in Washington, making new friends and securing financing for the group. Joined by Brooke, an American whose pre-Rendon experience including lobbying for the beer industry, the two shared a Georgetown row house, owned by Chalabi's family, and cultivated Republican Congressmen. Chalabi impressed neoconservatives like Dick Cheney, Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, befriending them and gaining support for his plan to achieve a Saddam-free Iraq.

Chalabi and Brooke's lobbying paid off with the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, which promised \$97 million in aid to the INC and other opposition groups for "establishing a program [to] support a transition to democracy in Iraq." But the State Department under Clinton held up funding for the INC. Once George W. Bush ascended to the presidency, Chalabi and the INC had guaranteed funding and very well positioned friends in the White House and Pentagon.

In 2001, Chalabi appeared on the surface to be blowing his second chance as an Iraqi opposition leader.

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“Despite millions of dollars in U.S. aid, the leading Iraqi opposition group has proved so hapless in making use of the money, accounting for it, finding recruits for Pentagon training and preventing its own fragmentation that the State Department is searching for alternatives,” the *Los Angeles Times* reported in March. But the State Department’s doubts about the INC failed to dampen the group’s support in the Pentagon, the Vice President’s office and with some Republican members of Congress, including members of the Senate Foreign Relations committee.

It should have come as no surprise: Chalabi and the INC racked up big bills for PR and lavish accommodations on the State Department’s tab with little to show for it. The group’s poor bookkeeping drew a State Department audit in 2001. Released in January 2002, the audit looked at funds spent on the INC’s Information Collection Program. “Among other things, it questioned \$2.2 million of \$4.3 million in expenditures between March 2000 and May 2001, including items such as \$2,070 to pay for a Washington health center membership, money paid to the Burson-Marsteller public relations firm, and lack of documentation for \$101,762 spent on travel and badge distribution for attendees at a human rights conference,” the *Washington Post* reported.

Between 1999-2003, the INC retained PR giant Burson-Marsteller’s Washington lobbying arm, BKSH & Associates. Despite restrictions on taxpayer money being spent to influence public and Congressional opinion, K. Riva Levinson, a managing director at BKSH, did media work and lobbying for the group. According to Brooke, BKSH received \$25,000 a month from the State Department.

Some would say the money was well spent. Burson-Marsteller and the INC won *PR Week’s* 2003 public affairs division award for getting the INC’s message out and building its “profile with key political decision makers in the US, Europe and the Middle East. Of particular importance was positioning INC founder Dr Ahmad Chalabi and other Iraqi opposition spokespeople as authoritative political leaders. With teams working in Washington, New York, London and Europe, B-M compiled intelligence reports, defector briefings, conferences and seminars on the transition of Iraqi society post-Saddam,” *PR Week* wrote.

### **SAME OLD DOG, SAME OLD TRICKS**

While Chalabi may have failed as an Iraqi opposition leader, he succeeded at spearheading a “sophisticated marketing operation” to topple Saddam. Brooke told the

*New Yorker*, “This war would not have been fought if it had not been for Ahmad.”

Brooke may not have been overstating Chalabi’s success. Without his neoconservative supporters in the Pentagon and White House, Chalabi and the INC would not have had an eager, war-hungry audience for the fruits of the group’s Information Collection Program. Receiving \$340,000 per month—first from the State Department, then from the Pentagon—until May 2004, the program was the source of much of the key, controversial intelligence used by the White House to make its case for the Iraq invasion.

The INC’s influence, however, remained mostly below the radar until March 2004, when Democratic Senators John Kerry and Carl Levin requested the General Accounting Office investigate the group’s use of State Department money between 2001 and 2002. The Senators were concerned about a June 2002 letter from the INC to the Senate Appropriations Committee that took credit for placing a 108 news stories based on information provided by the INC’s Information Collection Program. “The assertions in the articles reinforced President Bush’s claims that Saddam Hussein should be ousted because he was in league with Osama bin Laden, was developing nuclear weapons and was hiding biological and chemical weapons,” *Knight Ridder* reported.

Brooke told *Newsweek* in 2003 that “State Department money had been used to finance the expenses of INC defectors who were sources for some of the listed news stories. Brooke said there were ‘no restrictions’ on the use of U.S. government funds to make such defectors available to the news media.” But in March 2004, a different INC spokesman contradicted Brooke, claiming, “None of [defector] expenses was related to meeting journalists.”

### **THE DEFECTOR’S TALE**

One such defector sponsored by the INC was Adnan Ihsan Saeed al Haideri, who left Iraq in 2001. He claimed to have knowledge of hundreds of chemical, biological and nuclear research sites throughout Iraq. Haideri’s story appeared on the *New York Times* front page on December 20, 2001 under Judith Miller’s byline.

In her story, Miller acknowledged the INC’s support of Haideri, but only after giving his story credibility. “Government experts said yesterday that he had also been interviewed twice by American intelligence officials,” Miller wrote. “The experts said his information seemed reliable and significant.” Haideri’s credibility may have, in fact, been in question at the time of the interview. “The INC reportedly provided Miller with the



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exclusive Haideri story three days after he had shown deception in a polygraph test administered by the C.I.A. at the request of the Defense Intelligence Agency,” the *New Yorker* reported.

In a January 2003 story, Miller again refers to Haideri, claiming, “Intelligence officials said that some of the most valuable information” had come from him. She did report that some in Washington doubted INC’s defectors, but relying on Richard Perle, her article belittled the CIA’s concerns. “Until recently, CIA officials were so hostile to defectors brought out of Iraq by the Iraqi National Congress,” Miller wrote, “that they refused to interview them and even tried to discredit their information. ‘But ultimately, the flow of information was so vital and so overwhelming that they could no longer ignore it,’ Mr. Perle said.”

Miller wasn’t the only journalist given an exclusive with Haideri. The INC also called upon an old friend from the Rendon days to tape a television interview, which aired on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Paul Moran, an Australian freelance cameraman under contract with the Rendon Group, had worked with INC members in Tehran, training them “to covertly film military activities,” according to the *Adelaide Advertiser*.

On March 22, 2003, Moran became the first journalist casualty of the Iraq war, when he was killed by a suicide car bomber in Northern Iraq. He had been on assignment for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Rendon Group head John Rendon attended Moran’s funeral in Adelaide. The *Advertiser* reported that Moran, according to family and friends, had worked with the INC on a CIA-funded propaganda campaign to destabilize Saddam Hussein. “The fact that Mr. Rendon took the time to fly out here during what must be an incredibly busy time for him shows just how highly Paul was regarded,” a close friend of Moran’s told the *Advertiser*.

Moran continued to work on and off for the Rendon Group until shortly before the Iraq War. On at least two occasions, the Rendon contracts were for US government work, including preparation for Operation Iraqi Freedom, the *Advertiser* reported. The paper also revealed that Moran had been “involved in the defection of an Iraqi scientist.” *Dateline*, a program on Australia’s SBS network, looked into Moran’s INC and Rendon connections in July 2003.

Haideri’s story “was a huge worldwide scoop for Paul,” INC’s Zaab Sethna told *Dateline*. Sethna, a US citizen, and Moran had met in 1990 while working for the Rendon Group on a media campaign against Saddam paid for by the Kuwaiti government. (See “Citizens for a Free Kuwait” on [Disinfectopedia.org](http://Disinfectopedia.org).) After the

Gulf War, Rendon rehired Moran and Sethna for more anti-Saddam work, this time on the CIA’s tab.

“The information that al Haideri provided went directly to President Bush, it went to Tony Blair, might even have gone to PM Howard as a member of the coalition,” Sethna told *Dateline*. “The information that al Haideri provided was very, very significant, in terms of proof that Iraq was building weapons of mass destruction. And then the other information al Haideri provided was targeting information for the coalition, because he knew the locations. He knew 300 different facilities that the Iraqis were using for weapons of mass destruction.”

INC defectors were routinely channeled to the Pentagon’s Office of Special Plans, an intelligence office created in early 2002 by the Defense Department neoconservatives to collect intelligence that supported an invasion of Iraq. The OSP has been accused of being a “shadow agency within an agency,” cherry-picking pieces of uncorroborated, anti-Iraq intelligence to fulfill a “narrow, well-defined political agenda,” Richard Dreyfuss and Jason Vest reported for *Mother Jones*.

“According to multiple sources, Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress sent a steady stream of misleading and often faked intelligence reports into U.S. intelligence channels,” Dreyfuss and Vest wrote. Vincent Cannistraro called INC intelligence “propaganda. Much of it is telling the Defense Department what they want to hear, using alleged informants and defectors who say what Chalabi wants them to say, [creating] cooked information that goes right into presidential and vice presidential speeches.”

After the Iraq invasion, the DIA leaked a report that concluded that nearly all of the informants produced by the INC were worthless. *Knight Ridder* reported that Haideri had returned to Iraq with American officials after the invasion and was unable to locate any weapons production facilities.

Whether it was spoken or unspoken, Chalabi and Brooke came to understand the kind of intelligence their contacts in Washington wanted. “I’m a smart man,” Brooke told the *New Yorker*. “I saw what they wanted, and I adapted my strategy. . . . I sent out an all-points bulletin to our network, saying, ‘Look, guys, get me a terrorist, or someone who works with terrorists. And, if you can get stuff on WMD, send it!’”

The critical examinations of Chalabi and the INC come too late. What started out as a covert propaganda operation, was still functioning as covert propaganda operation a decade later. The patronage, the agendas and the audiences may have changed, but the anti-Saddam message was the same, and Ahmed Chalabi was there to get what he could from it. ■