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HEALTH-US: Top Army Hospital Swamped by Tide of Wounded 

HEALTH-US: Top Army Hospital Swamped by Tide of Wounded
By Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA, United States, Mar 28 (IPS) - As a nine-member commission prepares to investigate allegations of ineptitude at the United States' largest and most prestigious military hospital, politicians in Washington are waiting to see if any more colleagues associated with the scandal will lose their jobs.

Numerous problems at the Walter Reed Army Medical Centre - including mouse feces, dead cockroaches and mould in the residential outpatient buildings, and an often-numbing level of red tape - first came to national attention in February when the Washington Post published a series entitled "The Other Walter Reed."

Reporters Anne Hull and Dana Priest spent approximately four months investigating the living conditions and standards of care for soldiers recuperating from horrific injuries sustained in Iraq and Afghanistan at Walter Reed AMC in Washington DC - without the permission of the administrators there.

What they found was neglect and incompetence in the outpatient facility, triggering several investigations and the departure of three high-ranking military officers.

On Mar. 1, the Army fired Major General George Weightman, the commander of Walter Reed AMC. A day later, U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates fired Army Secretary Francis Harvey.

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Lieutenant General Kevin C. Kiley, then the Army's Surgeon General and also the officer in charge of Walter Reed AMC from 2002 to 2004, announced his resignation from military service on Mar. 12.

Days before Kiley's resignation, President George W. Bush announced the formation of a bipartisan commission - co-chaired by former Republican senator and World War Two veteran Bob Dole and Donna Shalala, a Democrat who ran the Health and Human Services department in the Bill Clinton administration - to investigate the allegations raised in the Washington Post expose.

When Dole was in Miami on Sunday to give a speech, he met with Shalala, who is now the president of the University of Miami, and the two informally spent 90 minutes at the Miami Veterans Affairs Medical Centre, taking a tour of the facility

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and talking with recuperating veterans.

"The bottom line here is that we know we have problems and we're going to fix them, no matter what it takes and how much it costs, as soon as possible," Army Lieutenant Colonel Bob Tallman, a Pentagon spokesman, told IPS.

He said the Army is addressing four related issues: soldier accountability, health and welfare, administrative processes and information dissemination.

"The Army has committed more case workers to speed up the physical evaluation that soldiers go through when they come back from the battlefields," he said. It has also "put ombudsmen in different hospitals and these people will listen to and record any complaints that people have."

Army Public Affairs Officer Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Arata told IPS that a new hotline has been set up to assist wounded soldiers and their families. "In the first three days that the hotline was open, we got 201 calls and we determined that 64 of these calls were really about issues that we could immediately address," he said.

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Members of veterans' organisations were incensed when the Washington Post investigative series was published.

"The universal feeling among our members is that things need to be done and our military personnel deserve better," said Jerry Newberry, spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars. "When you stop and consider how fast things usually go in Washington, which is quite slow, it's pretty remarkable how fast things have moved since these stories in the (Washington) Post began."

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"Our members couldn't believe what they were reading in these newspaper stories," admitted Dave Autry of the group Disabled American Veterans. "For many days it was the only thing that people talked about here."

Washington is a town full of partisan strategists always looking for a chance to taint their political opponents and, unsurprisingly, the Walter Reed AMC scandal presents just such an opportunity.

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Democrats are now targeting Rep. C.W. "Bill" Young, a Republican from St. Petersburg, Florida who was chairman of the House Appropriations Committee from 1999 to 2005 and a 36-year member of the U.S. Congress, for not objecting more strenuously to the conditions at Walter Reed AMC.

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Both Young and his wife Beverly frequently did volunteer work at Walter Reed, but stopped in 2004 when they said their complaints to the Army about problems there were ignored.

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The Florida Democratic Party is now vetting possible candidates to run against Young, who was just reelected last year. "In the end, Congressman Young could have done something about all of this when he was (House Appropriations) chairman, such as call public hearings, but he did not," said Mark Bubriski, a Florida Democratic Party media relations spokesman.

Repeated requests for an interview with Congressman Young were not granted.

One of the most knowledgeable members of the U.S. Congress on these issues is Steve Buyer, an Indiana Republican and ranking member of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs. He was one of the first politicians to meet with members of the Dole-Shalala Commission.

"I think that one of the issues that the commission will pick up on is information technology. If we move to a seamless IT system, we can improve the quality of our care (and eliminate unnecessary paperwork in the various military and governmental medical care systems)," said Rep. Buyer.

"My counsel to them (the Dole-Shalala Commission) was that they have only four months and (to) pick several topics and go deep," said Rep. Buyer.

The Dole-Shalala Commission is slated to have its first formal meeting on Apr. 13 and will then formulate its plans to investigate the numerous allegations made in "The Other Walter Reed" stories. The commission also plans to examine the workings of the Department of Veterans Affairs. (END/2007)

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CHALLENGES 2006-2007: U.S. Unlikely to Sentence Soldiers to Death in Wartime



CHALLENGES 2006-2007: U.S. Unlikely to Sentence Soldiers to Death in Wartime
By Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA, Florida, Dec 5 (IPS) - The final month of 2006 will be one to remember because of the first two - of perhaps many - U.S. army servicemen will face charges that can carry the death penalty for crimes committed in Iraq.

Yet, 2007 may well be the year the U.S. military decides instead to spare their lives and sentence them to life in prison.

Both Sgt. Paul Cortez and Private First Class Jesse Spielman are scheduled to appear separately in military court in mid-December. Together with three other defendants - Pfc. Bryan Howard, Specialist James Barker, and discharged former Private Steven Green -, the men are accused of raping a 14-year-old girl and murdering her and her family last March near the Iraqi city of Al-Mahmudiyah.

Cortez, Spielman, and Howard face court martial proceedings at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, headquarters for the 101st Airborne Division where they served. Green has pleaded not guilty to murder and sexual assault and is facing federal charges.

Barker pleaded guilty to numerous charges, including premeditated murder, to avoid the death penalty. He received a 90-year prison sentence in late November.

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Those airmen are not the only military personnel who could face charges for war crimes that carry possible death sentences.

A U.S. sailor and seven marines are accused of killing an Iraqi man in Hamdaniya on Apr. 26. Another six to eight Marines, who allegedly killed 24 Iraqi civilians in November 2005 in Haditha, could also face execution.

An investigation into the Haditha incident by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) is ongoing to determine if charges against the marines should be filed. The marines currently are restricted to the base-grounds of Camp Pendleton, California, pending the findings of the investigation.

While Barker avoided execution, his manoeuvre raises the question of whether military personnel could be sentenced to death, even if the crimes for which they are

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found guilty were committed in wartime.

Although the law clearly states they can, politically such a sentence would not be possible, said Lee D. Schinasi, a retired Army Judge Advocate General's Corps (JAG) colonel who is now an associate professor of law at Barry University in Orlando, Florida..

"I don't think that you will see it (the death penalty) applied these days in relation to all of these alleged cases, because the average civilian American is aware of the tremendous pressures that soldiers are under during wartime," Schinasi told IPS. "To carry out the killing of a soldier who has been found guilty of a crime committed during wartime has tremendous ramifications."

There is a loyalty between the U.S. public and its soldiers, said Schinasi, who likened the relationship to a social contract. "If capital punishment was carried out on a soldier convicted of a crime committed during wartime that would be perceived as a violation of that social contract," Schinasi said.

Put simply: The public supports its soldiers because the military protects the public, Schinasi said.

Military services in other countries deal with the situation differently. Soldiers found guilty of war crimes in Europe, for instance, would face life imprisonment, said Diane Amann, a specialist on the subject, who is also a professor at the University of California-Davis law school.

Even in international tribunals that dealt with wartime crimes committed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, former military officers found guilty of some horrific crimes received life imprisonment, she told IPS.

The United Nations will not allow war crimes to be tried in Rwanda until that African nation agrees to abolish the death penalty. In contrast, although the U.S. stated it would introduce a more modern constitution in Iraq when it toppled Saddam Hussein, it still has allowed that nascent nation to maintain capital punishment. In November, Hussein, along with some military officers, was sentenced to hang. That verdict is on appeal.

U.S. soldiers have been executed during wartime before, but these incidents are rare and sometimes controversial. During the U.S. Civil War, Confederate army captain Henry Wirz, commander of the notorious Andersonville prison, was hung in November 1865, after the end of the war, on charges of "impairing the health and destroying the lives of prisoners." The prison, built to hold captured Union soldiers and in existence for only 14 months, housed 45,000 soldiers - nearly one-third of whom died in captivity.

Private Eddie Slovik was executed for desertion in 1945, the final year of World War II. He was the only soldier of the 49 who had been sentenced to die who actually was shot. The last execution of a soldier in the U.S. military justice system occurred in April 1961, for charges of rape and murder.

As of January 2006, the Department of Defence states that executions would be conducted not via firing squad but through lethal injection.

Kathleen Duignan, executive director of the National Institute of Military Justice in Washington, DC, told IPS the four-step process in the U.S. military justice system that is required to impose a death sentence ensures that the military judge and a panel of military officers must agree that a capital offence exists, and that the decision to execute must be unanimous.

"Ultimately, after all levels of review, the case would go to the president of the United States for approval. The president must personally approve execution of the sentence and even then the sentence can be delayed on federal habeas review," said Duignan.

Though it is not used often, the United States apparently feels the need to maintain the death penalty among its military ranks, agreed Amann and Schinasi.

"The reason why the death penalty isn't taken off of the (U.S. military justice) system," Schinasi said, "is for the same reason that it stays on the civilian law books - to show society that there are certain crimes that people wouldn't put up with."

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SCIENCE: What the "Wise Men" Saw...   

SCIENCE: What the "Wise Men" Saw...
By Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA., Florida, Dec 19 (IPS) - The Biblical tale of the "three wise men" who followed a particularly bright star to the birthplace of the Baby Jesus continues to fascinate amateur and professional astronomers more than two millennia after the event allegedly occurred.



[A comet is one of many theories for the Star of Bethlehem.](#)

[Credit: NASA](#)

Thanks to Galileo Galilei, whose 1610 invention of the first telescope made star-gazing a more finite science, astronomers ranging in experience from full-time university professors to weekend hobbyists have speculated on what the fabled Star of Bethlehem could have been.

Many are divided over whether the story is pure allegory, or based on a real-world phenomenon, such a comet, supernova, or lunar eclipse.

Michael Bakich, a senior editor for Astronomy magazine, tends toward the former. "There's just no compelling case for a natural event; that's why we don't cover this in the magazine," he said.

"The first attempts at publicly discussing this occurred here in America during the 1930s and 1940s, and planetariums have been putting on these shows [about the Star of Bethlehem], usually about this time of year, ever since, as these shows are very popular."

Different hypotheses have been circulating for years - one is a shooting star. This theory was made popular in 2001, when the book "The Star of Bethlehem" was published by Sir Patrick Moore. For decades, the long-time astronomer hosted "The Sky at Night", one of the most popular television series ever aired by the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Yet a number of astronomers dismiss this proposition. "It (a shooting star) only lasts a short period of time, not long enough for the Three Wise Men to follow it for days," said Dr. Stan Dermott, chairman of the University of Florida Department of

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Astronomy.

"A shooting star, which is actually a meteor, doesn't last long, so you can throw that out," echoed Debra L. David, founder of The Woman Astronomer web site.

Because Halley's Comet, named after the English astronomer, once appeared on Christmas Day in 1758, for decades a belief persisted that it was the Star of Bethlehem. However, no historical or scientific evidence backs this supposition.

"The idea of a comet doesn't really make sense," said Derrick Pitts, chief astronomer for the Fels Planetarium in Philadelphia. "It doesn't hold up well under scientific scrutiny."

Comets are comprised mostly of dust and gases, and have cores of ice and "tails" that always point away from the sun. They "were believed to be signs of doom by people back then," said Geza Gyuk, director of astronomy at the Adler Observatory in Chicago. "People in prior times were a lot more attuned to the skies and seeing [the] reflection of human events there."

As for a lunar eclipse? "It only lasts an hour or two, not for an extended period of time," explained Dermott.

"It's not rare enough of an event where people back then, all over the world, would have taken notice," said Bakich.

The theory of a supernova, or super-bright dying star, appears to hold more promise.

"During the night, anything in the sky would seem to move with the stars as the Earth rotates. So a supernova could have led them [the Magi] to a particular direction, although I'm somewhat sceptical about that, but it certainly would lead them to an exact spot, as the Three Wise Men were said to be led," Gyuk said.

"You also have to remember that many Biblical scholars, after years of research, now believe that Christ was born in Nazareth (Israel) not Bethlehem. That point also needs to be considered," he said.

The supernova theory interests Dermott: "Sometimes, but not always, they take place over a long period of time, and its possible that [people living at the time] may have thought that it was some sort of symbol - although that doesn't explain why they [the wise men] would follow it to one particular place," he said.

Astronomers know that in June 2 B.C., there was a conjunction of Jupiter and Venus, when the two planets appeared near one another in the sky. For this reason, some say the planetary conjunction theory is the most plausible.

"For years, we had a programme for the public that dealt with this, in which we talked about, in terms of astronomy, what the Star of Bethlehem could have been. What we determined was that the theory of the planetary conjunction seems to make the most sense, as it relates back to Scriptures and everything in the Bible," said Pitts.

"Only planetary conjunction, besides the supernova theory, makes sense to me. These people had good knowledge of the movement of the planets back then and they may have even been able to predict it somehow," Dermott agreed.

But however lively the debate, it is unlikely to ever be settled.

"My feeling is that this an allegorical story to mark the birth of a person that many people considered, and still consider, important. This is a theological question, because only [the Gospel of] Matthew mentions it at all and really, not too much. Most theologians see this as an allegorical story, possibly because there's not a good sense of the movement in the sky as it's described in the Gospel according to Matthew," Gyuk said.

"It's highly likely that the story was an allegory because back then people were often telling stories and stories tend to get embellished as they are retold," offered Davis.

"Of course it's possible that the story is an allegory because nothing exists that says that the Bible, without question, is history. It was written for faith. Faith works well for billions of people but that doesn't make the Bible scientific. That's not a denigration of the Bible but Scriptures doesn't provide enough information for us to form any sort of a starting reference point," explained Pitts.

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FILM: Few Oscars for Mexicans, But They Made Their Mark

FILM: Few Oscars for Mexicans, But They Made Their Mark
By Diego Cevallos*

MEXICO CITY, Feb 26 (IPS) - The 79th Oscar awards ceremony left Mexico with a bittersweet taste. Films by Mexican directors were nominated for Academy Awards in 16 categories, but only earned four - for art direction, cinematography, make-up and musical score. Nevertheless, Mexicans made their mark.

In Sunday's ceremony in Hollywood, "Pan's Labyrinth" directed by Guillermo del Toro took three Oscars, and Alejandro González Iñárritu's "Babel" took the award for best original score.

But the third film directed by a Mexican filmmaker, "Children of Men" by Alfonso Cuarón, came away empty-handed, although it was nominated for three awards.

Although the Oscars for best director and best film were awarded elsewhere, the nominations themselves and previous prizes won by these movies spread the local film artists' fame abroad, and awakened keen interest in Mexican talent, which is attracting glances from giant Hollywood studios.

"We hope that the achievements of Mexican directors, which are the fruit of their own work, will boost the film industry in our country, and that funding will become available for productions," critic Rey Ojeda told IPS.

Mexicans Eugenio Caballero and Guillermo Navarro won the Oscar for their work in "Pan's Labyrinth", for best art direction and cinematography, respectively. The film also took the award for make-up, by Spaniards David Martí and Montse Ribé.

"Babel", which was nominated for best film and director, supporting actress, original screenplay and editing, drew a blank in all of these. But it won the prize for best musical score, collected by Argentine Gustavo Santaolalla.

Most Mexican on-line media outlets carried front-page stories Monday with reports on the Academy Awards ceremony, and commentary full of disappointment over the meagre number of trophies earned. The unprecedented number of nominations for

Mexican-directed films had sparked an enormous amount of enthusiasm.

In Congress, legislators are debating the idea of honouring the three Mexican filmmakers, and President Felipe Calderón plans to do the same.

The Oscars awarded on Sunday brought the number of gold statuettes awarded to films with Mexican participation to eight. In 1953 and 1957, they went to Mexican actor Anthony Quinn, a naturalised U.S. citizen, and in 1972 film producer Miguel Arango won awards for a documentary and a short film.

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"This Sunday's prizes are really the first, because Quinn was actually more of a U.S. citizen than a Mexican, and Arango just provided the money for two films, which is important, but doesn't involve creativity," said Ojeda.

"Each of them (Cuarón, González Iñárritu, and del Toro) has a very distinct style of film-making. Each has a clear perspective to their stories. What makes them unique is that each has a language (of film-making and directing) all to themselves," explained Charles Copayo, a film critic for the "El Nuevo Herald" newspaper, a Miami-based publication whose target audience are the millions of Hispanics in the south Florida area.

"There isn't any director under 50 in Hollywood that comes close to what any of them (the three Mexican directors) can do," he told IPS.

"Babel" tells three separate stories, which are based in Japan, Mexico, Morocco, and the United States. González Iñárritu, 43, does not present all three stories in a chronological narrative order. Instead, he disorganises them through the editing, and viewers gradually come to see that they are all indirectly, and improbably, connected by one event.

"Children of Men" is also a bleak drama, but one that is set in 2027. In the film, Cuarón, 45, presents a world without children, where women are infertile and people are pitiless and full of opportunism.

Del Toro, 42, has made a movie that has a nightmarish quality in "Pan's Labyrinth." In Spain, in 1944, ten-year old Ofelia finds a stone labyrinth in a wooded area, in which she meets a faun who leads her on a series of adventures. Ofelia's main enemy is her stepfather, Captain Vidal, a sadistic military officer.

Incorporating elements from "Alice in Wonderland," "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy, and "The Wizard of Oz", the film is both a horror-filled fairy tale and also a commentary about the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939-1975).

What all three of these movies have in common is that death and violence are integral to the plots.

Stacy Perskie, a Mexico City-based assistant director who has worked on "Apocalypto," "Titanic," "The Legend of Zorro" and other movies, told IPS that "None of these three films are generic in tone, so I don't think that you will see

Shopping Cart Hollywood trying to copy these guys' films. Their styles are so distinctive that it would be difficult for Hollywood to mass produce movies that attempt to mimic their styles."

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Perskie - who was slated to be an assistant director for "Babel" but was busy working on "Apocalypto" - said that "Here in Mexico, from what I detect from people's opinions about these three films, there are a lot of mixed opinions."

"In one sense, I know that people here are very proud that they can make interesting and profitable Hollywood films, but on the other hand, I know for a fact that there are many Mexicans, and also many people in the Mexican film industry, that want González Iñárritu, del Toro and Cuarón to come back to this country and make films for Mexican audiences," she said.

All three left Mexico several years ago to seek their fortunes in Hollywood, the mecca of Western commercial film-making, and they met with success. But they did not cut their ties with their own country, and have returned regularly to take up film projects here.

Their growing fame and the recent nominations for the Oscars gave rise to intense debate over whether this phenomenon can be said to reflect the health of Mexican filmmaking, as their films depend on foreign sponsorship and the actors come from various countries.

Guillermo Arriaga, who wrote the screenplay for "Babel", said that the awards "call for reflection on the part of the authorities and society as a whole about the future of the Mexican film industry."

Mexico has made an average of 40 films a year since the mid-1990s. Several of these have not been shown in the country, because of obstacles put up by the film distributors. This production level is well below that of the golden age of local filmmaking in the 1940s and 1950s, when an average of over 90 films were produced every year.

The attention now being attracted by Mexican filmmakers, screenplays, cameramen, editors, sound engineers, actors and directors "should no doubt be noted, not just out of national pride and joy, which is perfectly valid, but also for the implicit underlying messages and signals conveyed," said film critic Rafael Aviña, who writes for several local media.

"Apart from the obvious national loss of talented individuals who are emigrating to other countries, and the difficulties they experienced in developing their respective specialties in their own country, there is a clear need to see films as an important cultural good belonging to everybody, and at the same time as a viable business proposition which requires economic incentives," said Aviña.

"I think all three (directors) have earned this. They have earned their credibility to have freedom in the Hollywood system. This leads to inspiring other young filmmakers, like myself, to do better, to try to make good, interesting films. So all of this craze about the Mexican film industry can only grow, and the situation can only get

better for us down here," opined Perskie.

Hollywood has already spied business opportunities in Mexico. Warner, Columbia and Disney have opened offices in this country, and their executives have announced that they are interested in working here with local talent. They have several projects on the drawing board, and in some cases they are linking up with Mexican producers.

"The challenge is to benefit from the transnational entertainment companies without sacrificing the language and interests of purely Mexican films, which are one of our essential cultural expressions, especially when we're being bombarded by junk commercial films," critic Ojeda said.

* With additional reporting by Mark Weisenmiller in Tampa, Florida, USA.
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ELECTIONS-US: E-Voting Squeaks By With Passing Grade  

ELECTIONS-US: E-Voting Squeaks By With Passing Grade
By Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA, Florida, Nov 9 (IPS) - An estimated 80 to 90 percent of the nearly 79 million U.S. voters either cast their mid-term elections ballot by computer on Tuesday or had their vote tabulated that way, and as experts had predicted, there were various glitches with electronic voting machines throughout the country.

For example, in Colorado, new machines and a lengthy ballot caused confusion among voters, making for long lines at polling places. In Denver, people waited for an hour or more to vote after the polls officially closed. In most U.S. states, polls are open from seven a.m. to seven p.m. on election days.

Voting machine-related problems were also reported in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, New Jersey, Missouri and Texas and Florida.

A possible computer glitch may have lost thousands of votes in Sarasota County, Florida in an election for a U.S. House of Representatives seat. As of Thursday, Democrat Christine Jennings had refused to concede to Republican Vern Buchanan until the matter is investigated.

"The big change in voting - especially since all of the problems that Florida had during the 2000 presidential election - is that people are looking more closely at their ballots and seeing more mistakes. E-voting must have checks and balances," David Dill, a computer science professor at Stanford University and the founder of the San Francisco-based group Verified Voting, told IPS.

While scattered reports of technical problems are still trickling in, there is no evidence so far that any involved deliberate hacking or tampering. However, other coercive and illegal tactics were apparently used to suppress voter turnout in some states.

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The National Coalition on Black Civic Participation (NCBCP), an organisation devoted to promoting civil and voting rights among African-Americans, had members in 15 states monitoring polling places for any signs of political party operatives trying to influence voters. Voter intimidation has a long history in U.S. politics, especially in the South.

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Early on Tuesday, dozens of voters in northern Virginia told the NCBCP monitors that in the early morning hours, they had received anonymous telephone calls saying, in essence, "You are registered in another state. If you try to vote today, you will be arrested on a federal charge."

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is currently investigating the matter. Virginia is now the key to a Democratic takeover of the Senate, with Democrat James Webb leading the Republican incumbent, George Allen, by a relatively narrow 7,000 votes.

Although Allen had threatened to contest the results, he is now expected to deliver a concession speech later this afternoon.

Dill's group has long urged that computerised voting be accompanied by a "paper trail" so that voters can verify the accuracy of their choice. So far, 28 states have adopted this requirement. He also believes that e-voting machines should be subject to random manual audits - something 13 states now do.

"There's no known way to make computers trustworthy and I know of no computer science professor who I respect that believes that they can be," Dill said.

The two main types of e-voting machines in the U.S. are optical-scan (which has an oval next to each candidate's name on the ballot that is filled in by the voter) and machines that use electronic ballots. They do not tally votes. Depending on each state, the counting process is done at a separate location, usually a county courthouse.

One of the leading companies that designed and built both types of voting machines is Diebold Electronic Systems, based in North Canton, Ohio. "We offer support services (to districts and precincts that use Diebold voting machines) but we do it upon the request and authorisation of election jurisdiction," said David Bear, a Diebold spokesman.

On election days, Diebold provides anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 part-time employees throughout the U.S. to help poll workers in the voting process. In non-election years, the company has approximately 100 employees.

Diebold has had its share of controversy. Over the summer, a Princeton University computer scientist and some graduate students found a way to hack into a Diebold voting machine's computer software, demonstrating that such an event could occur and that an election's outcome could be manipulated.

In 2003, the former CEO of Diebold, Walden O'Dell, circulated a now-infamous George W. Bush fundraiser invitation in which he declared: "I am committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to the president next year."

Throughout this month, Home Box Office (HBO) is broadcasting the documentary "Hacking Democracy". The film shows how Bev Harris, a writer from Seattle, got in possession of about 40,000 computer files from a Diebold machine by accident, doing so merely by clicking onto a web link. She then took the data to a local computer

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expert, who found very little security in the Diebold computer software.

Bear told IPS that "Hacking Democracy" is "full of mistakes".

"I don't think it was fact-checked," he said. "For example, the film says that Diebold tabulated 40 percent of the votes cast in the 2000 presidential election. Diebold wasn't even in the electronic voting business in America in 2000."

The first-known instance of electronic-voting in the U.S. happened in San Diego County, California in 1963, according to Kim Brace, president of Election Data Services (EDS), a consulting firm that collects data about e-voting.

"The Cubic system (named after the company that ran the 1963 e-voting) used was partly electronic and partly optical scan. Frankly, it didn't work too well," she said. "There were numerous problems with Cubic's system and Cubic realised that getting into the voting business was a big pain and costly and never did it again."

Today, Diebold alone has built and sold about 125,000 voting machines. The other two major players are Election Systems & Software of Nebraska and Sequoia Voting Systems of California.

"There are roughly 183,000 precincts in the country and that's a lot of places where problems could occur," Brace added.

One issue is that in many states there are no background checks of the employees that design and oversee voting machines. The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), an investigation unit of the U.S. Treasury Department, is now looking into a possible conflict of interest involving the owner of Sequoia Voting Systems and the Venezuelan telephone company CANTV.

Part of CFIUS's investigation is to try to determine whether CANTV is secretly controlled by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

U.S. citizens will return to the polls en masse in 2008. Dill told IPS that "There are no computer software programmes now being worked on, at least that I know of, that would eliminate everything that could corrupt e-voting systems in time to be used for the 2008 presidential election." (END/2006)

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CHALLENGES 2006-2007: Docu-mania Sweeps U.S.   

CHALLENGES 2006-2007: Docu-mania Sweeps U.S.
By Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA, Florida, Dec 22 (IPS) - From Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" to Barbara Kopple's "Shut Up and Sing" about the travails of the Dixie Chicks, U.S. audiences flocked to theatres in 2006 to watch films that took on heavy topics like global warming, the meaning of "patriotism" and the war in Iraq.

"People are curious, people know that they are deprived of information and know they are being fed disinformation," said Fayeque Rahman, who directed the award-winning short film "Necessary Illusions" in 2004.

"Considering this, I think that it is only natural that people will be drawn to products on the market that firstly, fly in the face of conventional formats as placed in the mouth of standardised media, and that secondly, paint a picture of the world that is seemingly real and actually questions the truth about the information or disinformation that is being fed to them," he told IPS.

"Necessary Illusions" tells the story of a young Canadian architecture student of Iranian origin who attempts to enter the United States to visit his Italian fiance in Los Angeles. He is detained by officials from Homeland Security at an airport in the U.S. - it is never revealed which one - and subjected to a humiliating strip-search. In the end, viewers are left uncertain if he will be admitted to the country or not.

"I based my script on a number of experiences I've had whilst entering the U.S. since the atrocities of 9/11 were committed. I also communicated with friends of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds who experienced similar or worse ordeals, and chose to create a dramatic arc out of them through the character of Sharia," explained Rahman, who lives and works in Toronto, Canada.

While other dramatic feature films like "Blood Diamond" are leading at the box office this month, 2006 also saw a rich crop of politically-minded documentaries in the top 10.

Top-grossing films included Eugene Jarecki's "Why We Fight", about the supremacy of the military in U.S. culture and politics, the "U.S. vs. John Lennon", about the legendary musician's anti-war activism, and "Who Killed the Electric Car?", about how auto makers, the oil industry and others conspired to undermine the mass

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marketing of zero-emissions vehicles.

"Iraq for Sale" and "Iraq in Fragments" also won critical acclaim and were screened in homes and theatres across the country and as far off as South Africa.

But even as more people appear interested in "serious" films, finding financial backers remains difficult.

"If you are a filmmaker trying to cover a politically sensitive subject in the United States, America has suffered such a degradation of our open media system in recent years, such a shift away from the values of a democratic society, that problems arise long before the distribution phase," Jarecki told IPS earlier this year.

"At the very start, the struggle to get financing for a film like ["Why We Fight"] in the United States would have proved immediately prohibitive. So we moved overseas to the BBC, to Canada, to France and Germany, to countries whose media systems are far more open than ours, and in many ways shame ours," he said.

Bob Ross, a film critic for the Tampa Tribune, agrees that well-known filmmakers like Barbara Kopple or Michael Moore, who made "Fahrenheit 9/11", "probably have no trouble getting sponsors, but all other documentary makers certainly do".

Ross noted that "An Inconvenient Truth", the third-highest grossing documentary in U.S. history, "is a phenomenon all its own. Very few documentaries have such success, both at the box office and with movie critics, and also are as well made and have such a prominent personality as Al Gore."

Environmental activists say that such films have led not only to greater public awareness, but to increased activism. Chris Miller of Greenpeace told IPS that more people have contacted representatives at the group's Project Hotseat, which lobbies the U.S. Congress to reduce global warming emissions, since the release of "An Inconvenient Truth".

Yet not everyone sees a clear correlation between the popularity of "message" documentaries and actual involvement in causes.

"Something like that is very hard to prove with concrete evidence," said Norman Ornstein, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research in Washington. "I also doubt if there's an increase in activism. Again, it's hard to prove that a film or documentary leads to direct activism. And how do you define activism? Is it writing a check for a cause you believe in, or some other activity?"

Ornstein cited "Shut Up and Sing", which tells the story of the all-female music group the Dixie Chicks and their renunciation of President George W. Bush during a 2003 concert in London, England.

After the London concert, many country-and-western radio stations in the U.S. refused to broadcast the Dixie Chicks' songs. As the months passed, public sentiment mounted in support of the trio, and Time magazine named the group one of the Top

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100 Most Influential People in its May 2006 issue.

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Still, Ornstein said, "I don't think that 'Shut Up and Sing' was as much a documentary about President Bush and his policies in Iraq as it was about people who wanted to hear good music by the Dixie Chicks."

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"The serious documentaries usually attract audiences that already agree with the point of view being expressed, and are happy to see their viewpoints on the big screen," noted Joe Saltzman, a journalism professor at the University of Southern California.

"What has happened in recent years is the digital revolution making it fairly easy for almost anyone to grab a digital camera and then edit the digital images on a fairly cheap computer programme. This makes it possible to make theatrical documentaries for far less money than ever before," he said.

Rahman also said that the boom in DVD production has been a good thing for independent filmmakers, especially in light of the relatively scant interest by major studios in financing documentaries.

"The issue for me, therefore, is far more about who monopolises what distribution sector and how one can acquire a film to watch," he said.

One important source of documentary financing is the U.S. cable networks.

"The best example of this is that HBO (Home Box Office) put up the money this year for Spike Lee's wonderful documentary about New Orleans coping with the after effects of Hurricane Katrina," Ross said. "But since that documentary ("When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts") was first shown on HBO TV, I believe that means that it is ineligible to be nominated for a Best Documentary Oscar."

Ornstein added that such investigative documentaries have a long and distinguished history in the U.S.

"We need to be careful about describing all of this as a new aspect of American culture," he said. "The CBS documentary of long ago that talked about migrant workers had a tremendous impact when it was first shown on TV. It put the issue of migrant farm workers rights at the top of the national agenda."

"Harvest of Shame," which was first broadcast on Thanksgiving Day in 1960 and narrated by the legendary broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, revealed the sub-human living and working conditions of migrant farm workers in the United States. The documentary had an immediate and powerful effect, spurring new legislation about field labour housing conditions. (END/2006)

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Chet Huntley Remembered (Radio WMNF)   

Chet Huntley remembered by local author

12/11/08 Mitch E. Perry

[WMNF Evening News Thursday](#)

Listen to this entire show:  [listen to this show](#)

Through the late 1950s and much of the 1960s, broadcast news's preeminent anchors were the NBC team of Chet Huntley and David Brinkley.

Huntley, whose birthday would have been Wednesday, retired in 1970 and died from lung cancer at 62 in 1974.

He's now the subject of a new biography written by a local author, Lutz resident Mark Weisenmiller. The book is called, "Chet Huntley: Newscaster From the West" and is published by Alka Press.

Over the Thanksgiving weekend, Weisenmiller came to the WMNF studios to talk about the legendary broadcaster, who was born in Montana and made his fame initially as a radio newscaster and reporter.

Weisenmiller contributes to Agence France Press and the Economist. We'll feature a second part of his interview on a future broadcast of the Evening News.

Chet Huntley remembered, Part II

12/15/08 Mitch E. Perry

[WMNF Evening News Monday](#)

Listen to this entire show:  [listen to this show](#)

Chet Huntley is one of the all-time most famous anchors in broadcast news history.

The Huntley-Brinkely report on NBC became the top-rated newscast in the late 1950s and ruled the Nielsen ratings until Walter Cronkite and CBS took over in 1967.

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In 1970, Chet Huntley retired to his home in Montana. He died in 1974 at 62.

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A new biography on Huntley, called, "Chet Huntley: Newscaster from the West: A New Kind of Book", written by local author Mark Weisenmiller has just been published by Alka Press International.

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Weisenmiller, who also writes for the Economist and Agence France Press, writes in his book that it was the coverage of the civil rights movement in Arkansas that catapulted the Huntley-Brinkeley report to become must see TV in 1957. He spoke about this during an interview with WMNF.

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The book is available online at alkapressinternational.com

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Lutz Author Signs Off On Chet Huntley Book   

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By WALT BELCHER

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Published: October 26, 2008

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LUTZ - When anchor [Chet Huntley](#) left NBC in 1970, he told viewers to "be patient and have courage, for there will be better and happier news one day if we work at it."

We're still working at it, and with each passing year, there are fewer people who remember when the stoic Huntley and his [acerbic](#) co-anchor, David Brinkley, were the most popular [newscasters](#) on television.

"The Huntley-Brinkley Report," which ran on NBC from 1956 to 1970, featured this tag team with their trademark sign-off:

"Good night, Chet."

"Good night, David."

"Their glory days were the late 1950s and early 1960s, especially their pioneering coverage of the 1960 and '64 presidential elections," says Mark Weisenmiller, an author, essayist and freelance journalist who has written a book about Huntley.

"Chet Huntley: Newscaster From the West" (Alka Press, \$15.98) arrives just as the 2008 presidential campaign is at a fever pitch.

"I think it's fascinating to see how far [television coverage](#) has come," says Weisenmiller. "There certainly are more [bells and whistles](#) now, such as bigger and better graphics, and the pace is a lot faster. But I'm not sure that the anchors today are as trusted and respected as [Huntley and Brinkley](#) were."

Weisenmiller says the book also is a short history of the evolution of television news. Their [evening newscast](#) was innovative because the program cut back and forth between Huntley in New York and Brinkley in Washington.

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Each developed a personal style of delivery. Brinkley added a touch of sarcasm and dry wit to his short, pithy sentences. Huntley was somber and often eloquent.

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"Brinkley is considered probably the greatest writer of television news ever, but Huntley also could write reams of lyrical prose," says Weisenmiller, who studied scripts from the newscasts. "Sadly, most of their newscasts were not saved, and I could find nothing before 1968."

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Weisenmiller, 44, who lives in Lutz, is a contributor to magazines such as Reason and The Economist. He has distinct memories of growing up in western Pennsylvania, where his family sat in front of the TV watching Huntley and Brinkley.

Born in Montana in 1911, Huntley grew up on a farm where he was shaped by the Depression era, as well as rural, Western values and hard work. He remained a cowboy at heart and kept a Winchester rifle and two brass spittoons in his NBC New York office.

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Weisenmiller says the two were co-workers and respectful colleagues, but because they lived and worked in different cities, they were not close friends. Off-camera, Brinkley was shy and Huntley was a loner who liked to end the day with a stiff shot of Scotch. They stayed on top of the ratings until CBS' Walter Cronkite surpassed them in the late 1960s.

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The book goes into much detail about how their newscasts, convention coverage and election-night coverage were produced. Weisenmiller describes Huntley as a social liberal and a fiscal conservative.

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The book points out several times at which Huntley delivered special commentaries, such as one in 1963 following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It can be seen on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=AX7BChan-xg).

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Huntley retired in 1970 to pursue his many business interests. He and Brinkley were among the highest-paid newscasters of their day. Huntley moved to Montana, where he continued to produce syndicated radio commentaries. He also developed the 15,000-acre Big Sky Resort.

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A chain smoker throughout his adult life, Huntley died from lung cancer in 1974 at age 62. (Brinkley was 82 when he died in 2003 as a result of complications from a fall.)

"My book is more than just a biography," Weisenmiller notes. "At the end of each chapter, I have included 'life lessons' drawn from Huntley's experiences."

Find out more at www.alkapressinternational.com or call 1-855-456-4793.

Reporter Walt Belcher can be reached at (813) 259-7654.

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