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OP-ED COLUMNIST

A Chill in Florida

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The state police investigation into get-out-the-vote activities by blacks in Orlando, Fla., fits perfectly with the political aims of Gov. Jeb Bush and the Republican Party.

The Republicans were stung in the 2000 presidential election when Al Gore became the first Democrat since 1948 to carry Orange County, of which Orlando is the hub. He could not have carried the county without the strong support of black voters, many of whom cast absentee ballots.

The G.O.P. was stung again in 2003 when Buddy Dyer, a Democrat, was elected mayor of Orlando. He won a special election to succeed Glenda Hood, a three-term Republican who was appointed Florida secretary of state by Governor Bush. Mr. Dyer was re-elected last March. As with Mr. Gore, the black vote was an important factor.

These two election reverses have upset Republicans in Orange County and statewide. Moreover, the anxiety over Democratic gains in Orange County is entwined with the very real fear among party stalwarts that Florida might go for John Kerry in this year's presidential election.

It is in this context that two of the ugliest developments of the current campaign season should be viewed.

"A Democrat can't win a statewide election in Florida without a high voter turnout - both at the polls and with absentee ballots - of African-Americans," said a man who is close to the Republican establishment in Florida but asked not to be identified. "It's no secret that the name of the game for Republicans is to restrain that turnout as much as possible. Black votes are Democratic votes, and there are a lot of them in Florida."

The two ugly developments - both focused on race - were the heavy-handed investigation by Florida state troopers of black get-out-the-vote efforts in Orlando, and the state's blatant attempt to purge blacks from voter rolls through the use of a flawed list of supposed felons that contained the names of thousands of African-Americans and, conveniently, very few Hispanics.

Florida is one of only a handful of states that bar convicted felons from voting, unless they successfully petition to have their voting rights restored. The state's "felon purge" list had to be abandoned by Glenda Hood, the secretary of state (and, yes, former mayor of Orlando), after it became known that the flawed list would target blacks but not Hispanics, who are more likely in Florida to vote Republican. The list also contained the names of thousands of people, most of them black, who should not have been on the list at all.

Ms. Hood, handpicked by Governor Bush to succeed the notorious Katherine Harris as secretary of state, was forced to admit that the felons list was a mess. She said the problems were unintentional. What clearly was

intentional was the desire of Ms. Hood and Governor Bush to keep the list secret. It was disclosed only as a result of lawsuits filed under Florida's admirable sunshine law.

Meanwhile, the sending of state troopers into the homes of elderly black voters in Orlando was said by officials to be a response to allegations of voter fraud in last March's mayoral election. But the investigation went forward despite findings in the spring that appeared to show that the allegations were unfounded.

Why go forward anyway? Well, consider that the prolonged investigation dovetails exquisitely with that crucial but unspoken mission of the G.O.P. in Florida: to keep black voter turnout as low as possible. The interrogation of elderly black men and women in their homes has already frightened many voters and intimidated elderly get-out-the-vote volunteers.

The use of state troopers to zero in on voter turnout efforts is highly unusual, if not unprecedented, in Florida. But the head of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Guy Tunnell, who was also handpicked by Governor Bush, has been unfazed by the mounting criticism of this use of the state police. His spokesmen have said a "person of interest" in the investigation is Ezzie Thomas, a 73-year-old black man who just happens to have done very well in turning out the African-American vote.

From the G.O.P. perspective, it doesn't really matter whether anyone is arrested in the Orlando investigation, or even if a crime was committed. The idea, in Orange County and elsewhere, is to send a chill through the democratic process, suppressing opposing votes by whatever means are available.

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