

OP-ED COLUMNIST
Sacrifice and Sabotage
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Viola Gregg Liuzzo is not a name that rings many bells anymore.

Mrs. Liuzzo, a white woman who lived in Detroit, was 39 years old, married and the mother of five when she decided, early in 1965, to head south to volunteer her services in the brutal struggle to get blacks the right to vote. She told her husband it was something she just had to do.

She participated in the now legendary march along Route 80, the Jefferson Davis Highway, from Selma to Montgomery, Ala. The march was led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. When it was over, Mrs. Liuzzo offered to drive some of the marchers back to Selma in her two-year-old Oldsmobile.

On the return trip to Montgomery on the night of March 25, Mrs. Liuzzo was accompanied only by a black teenager. On a desolate stretch of the highway, they were overtaken by a car filled with enraged Ku Klux Klansmen and an undercover F.B.I. agent. Mrs. Liuzzo was shot in the face and killed. The car ended up in a ditch. The teenager survived by pretending he was dead.

Last night's presidential debate was an important exercise in American-style democracy. But democracy has no real meaning when citizens qualified to vote are deliberately prevented from casting their ballots, or are intimidated to the point where they are too frightened to vote.

Disenfranchisement comes in many guises. Two professors at the University of Miami did an extensive analysis of so-called voter errors in Miami-Dade County that has not previously been reported on, and that gives us an even more troubling picture of the derailment of democracy in Florida in the 2000 presidential race.

Bonnie Levin, a professor of neurology and psychology, and Robert C. Duncan, a professor of epidemiology, said the purpose of their study was to examine the demographics associated with the uncounted votes in Miami-Dade, a county that disqualified 27,000 votes.

Most of the public attention surrounding Florida's disputed election focused on "under-votes," when machines failed to record a vote for some reason - because of the notorious dimples or hanging chads in punch-card ballots, for example.

Professor Levin told me yesterday that the study convinced her that a much bigger problem in Miami-Dade involved "over-votes," instances in which ballots were reported

to have been disqualified because individuals cast votes for more than one presidential candidate.

In their analysis, the professors factored in variables associated with increased errors, such as advanced age or lower education levels. What they found startled them. The instances of voter errors, after taking all relevant variables into account, was much higher - higher than could reasonably have been expected - in predominantly African-American precincts. And, peculiarly, there was an especially high amount of over-voting among blacks.

"Although African-American and Hispanic precincts are similar in terms of household income and education, the African-American precincts have many more over-votes and under-votes," the professors wrote. "Interestingly, they differ strongly in party affiliation (African-American predominantly Democrat, Hispanic more Republican)."

Surprise, surprise.

Dr. Levin said she did not believe these were the kinds of honest errors one would expect to find in an analysis of voting patterns. Something else was at work. "The data show that it was so specific to certain precincts," she said. "It was so targeted toward African-Americans. There was nothing random about it."

She said, "The most important finding was that education was not a predictor for African-Americans."

Now, in the 2004 presidential election, we're already seeing widespread vote-suppression efforts, from the failed attempt by the Jeb Bush administration to use bogus, biased lists of alleged felons to efforts in many parts of the country to prevent the registration of new voters, especially African-Americans.

The people trampling on voting rights today are following the same ugly tradition that resulted in the disenfranchisement of millions of black Americans and led to the murder of Viola Liuzzo and others.

At one time it was the Democratic Party that produced the grandmasters in the art of disenfranchisement. Now that torch has been passed to the Republicans. President Bush could put a stop to it, but so far he's chosen not to.