

## ***CHAPTER 17***

### ***THE FADING NATIONAL CONVENTIONS***

There was a time in American political history when the Democratic and Republican national conventions actually played a major role in the presidential nomination process. In the days before there were a significant number of presidential primaries and caucuses, national conventions made the final decision as to which candidate would win the party nomination for president. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, the national conventions had diminished to the point where all they really did was advertise the presidential candidates who had been selected in the primaries and caucuses the previous winter and early spring.

Political scientists came to describe the national conventions as “ratifying conventions” instead of “nominating conventions.” The conventions simply ratified the candidate chosen in the presidential primaries and caucuses. In reality, one had to go all the way back to 1952 to find political party national conventions that actually “nominated” someone for president.

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The 1952 Republican National Convention pitted World War II military hero Dwight D. Eisenhower, affectionately known as “Ike,” against U.S. Senator Robert Taft of Ohio. Taft was actually ahead of Eisenhower in the delegate count when the convention opened for business. Skillful maneuvering by the Eisenhower forces on the convention floor enabled Ike to win a majority of the delegate votes and thus become the 1952 Republican nominee. Eisenhower was elected president the following November.

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One of the first “ratifying” conventions occurred in 1960 in the Democratic Party. A relatively unknown U.S. senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, won six of the presidential primaries held by the Democratic Party that year. At that time, there were very few presidential primaries. The Kennedy forces used those six primary election victories to garner the support of powerful Democratic politicians in the populous cities on the East Coast and in the Midwest. By the time the convention began, it was common knowledge among

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the press and the political cognoscenti that Senator Kennedy had just enough delegate votes to get the nomination.

Astute observers sat in front of their television sets and waited to see if Kennedy's thin lead in the delegate count would hold up. It did, and the convention delegates made official the "foregone conclusion" that Kennedy would be the 1960 Democratic nominee. The following fall, Kennedy defeated Richard M. Nixon, the Republican candidate, in one of the closest presidential elections in United States history.

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A famous, and infamous, national convention took place in the Democratic Party in 1968. The host city was Chicago, and the rough-and-tumble style of Chicago politics was soon playing on nationwide television.

The Vietnam War was raging at the time and evoking anti-war protest demonstrations, particularly among college and university students. The incumbent Democratic president, Lyndon B. Johnson, declined to run for reelection because the war had made him so unpopular. Johnson's vice-president, former U.S. Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota, ran for the Democratic nomination for president with President Johnson's full and enthusiastic support.

Humphrey came into the 1968 Democratic National Convention with an iron grip on the party nomination. Humphrey and Johnson had lined up the big city party leaders in the East, the Midwest, and the South behind Humphrey's candidacy. Similar to President Johnson, Hubert Humphrey supported the involvement of U.S. troops in the war in Vietnam. Humphrey thereby antagonized the thousands of youthful anti-war demonstrators who had poured into the streets of Chicago to dramatize their opposition to the war.

Soon the war protesters were engaged in violent confrontations with the Chicago police. The protesters threw rocks and bottles at the police officers and, in some cases, tried to dump plastic bags filled with human urine over the policemen's heads. The Chicago police, looking overwhelmingly powerful in their riot gear, used night sticks, police dogs, and tear gas in an effort to clear the war protesters from the streets.

The major television networks, suspecting violence might occur,

had placed their TV cameras out on the streets as well as in the convention hall. As the battle on the streets intensified, television images of the rioting students and the retaliating police officers were beamed across the country.

As the convention proceeded, the television networks alternated scenes of votes on the convention floor with close-up coverage of the rioting and police response on the streets of Chicago. The net effect was to project to the American public a very negative image of the Democratic Party and its responsibility for escalating the war in Vietnam under President Johnson. Those negative images contributed to Hubert Humphrey losing the November election to the Republican candidate, Richard M. Nixon, the man who lost the presidency by such a narrow margin to John F. Kennedy back in 1960.

There was a major conclusion to be drawn from the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Both political parties saw all too clearly that national conventions must be tightly controlled and carefully regulated. Allowing a national convention to get out of control, as happened to the Democrats in Chicago in 1968, produces negative rather than positive results for both the party nominee for president and the party itself. After Chicago in 1968, both parties worked hard to ensure that only positive images went out over the television airwaves from their national conventions.

The tumult and mayhem at the 1968 Democratic National Convention led to loud cries for party reform. The Democrats amended their delegate selection process to make it easier for more minorities, young people, and women to attend the Democratic convention as delegates. These new rules were complicated, however, and state party organizations found them difficult to implement, particularly when the new rules were applied to state party caucuses and state party conventions. To simplify things, a large number of states adopted presidential primaries in place of caucuses and conventions.

The result was a substantial increase in the number of states holding Democratic presidential primaries. Republican primaries increased as

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well, because most states schedule Democratic and Republican presidential primaries on the same day. Only 17 states held presidential primaries in 1968. By 1976, just eight years later, 30 of the 50 states were staging presidential primaries. In 1976, almost three-fourths of the delegates to the party national conventions were chosen in primaries. It was at approximately this point in time, 1976, that the presidential primaries replaced the national conventions as the place where the party presidential nominee was chosen.

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The efforts of the Democratic Party to reform the delegate selection process and make it more equitable produced some weird results at first. Under the new rules, a significant number of anti-Vietnam War demonstrators were elected as delegates to the 1972 Democratic National Convention. These flower children dressed in casual clothing rather than suit coats and neckties or ladies' dresses. They sported purple sunglasses and draped love beads around their necks. Most of all, these new ultra-liberal Democratic delegates enjoyed shocking middle-class and middle-of-the-road Democrats looking in on television by taking far-left wing positions on major national issues.

Partly because of this hippie-dominated Democratic National Convention, the incumbent Republican president, Richard M. Nixon, scored a landslide victory in 1972 over his Democratic opponent, U.S. Senator George McGovern of South Dakota.

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The press quickly labeled such major mistakes at national conventions as "gaffes." One occurred at the 1980 Democratic Convention when incumbent Democratic President Jimmy Carter was being re-nominated for president.

Struggling to project an image of party unity, Carter wanted to be seen on prime-time television shaking the hand of U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts. Ted Kennedy was the man whom Carter had easily defeated in the 1980 Democratic primaries. At the Democratic Convention, every time Carter extended his hand to

Kennedy for a hand shake, Senator Kennedy seemed to pointedly move away. The television cameras recorded the entire comedy as President Carter followed Kennedy across the speaker's platform, Carter's hand outstretched for a handshake that never was to be. Instead of President Carter basking in the glow of televised party unity, what the television viewers saw was how much contempt Ted Kennedy had for Jimmy Carter.

President Carter was defeated in the general election by Republican Ronald Reagan.

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Things can go wrong at Republican national conventions as well as at Democratic ones. In 1992, the Republicans convened at the Houston Astrodome. The Republican nominee designate, George Bush the elder, sought to mend a few fences with the conservative wing of the party by inviting news columnist and television pundit Patrick Buchanan to address the convention. Buchanan had been one of the senior Bush's major opponents in the 1992 Republican presidential primaries and caucuses.

Instead of mending fences for George Bush, Pat Buchanan tore a few more down. In perhaps the most ill-tempered and abusive speech in party convention history, Buchanan labeled Bill Clinton, the 1992 Democratic Party nominee, a Vietnam War draft dodger and a supporter of gay-and- lesbian rights. Buchanan charged that Al Gore, the Democratic vice presidential nominee, was an environmental extremist. As for the 1992 Democratic National Convention, Pat Buchanan described it as "that giant masquerade ball...where 20,000 radicals and liberals came dressed up as moderates and centrists, in the greatest single example of cross-dressing in American political history."

Buchanan was just getting warmed-up. He accused Bill Clinton and his wife, Hilary Clinton, of mounting an undercover radical-liberal reform program. Buchanan said: "The agenda that Clinton & Clinton would impose on America - abortion on demand, a litmus test for the Supreme Court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious

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schools, women in military combat units - that's change, all right, but not the kind of change America needs."

The statement by Buchanan that garnered the most news-media criticism was one that described the 1992 presidential election as an all-out conflict between good and evil. "There is a religious war going on for the soul of America," Buchanan concluded, and "George Bush is on our side."

Buchanan's blunt charges and derogatory references in his speech to the 1992 Republican National Convention were immediately condemned by liberal editorial writers and left-wing newspaper columnists. The elder Bush's convention was said to have projected an image of "meanness" and "rancor" to the television audience rather than "party harmony." Buchanan's cantankerous speech succeeded only in causing the elder Bush to begin losing ground in the public opinion polls.

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If the senior George Bush's Republican Convention in 1992 was a disaster, Bill Clinton's Democratic Convention that same year stood in sharp contrast as a runaway success. The convention was held in Madison Square Garden in New York City. Nominee-to-be Clinton squashed any hint of party disharmony by allowing only committed Clinton supporters to speak to the convention when it was prime time on television.

Not content to have politicians running his convention, Bill Clinton hired two successful Hollywood television producers to do the job. They were the husband-and-wife team of Harry Thomason and Linda Bloodworth, known for producing such blockbuster television hits of the time as *Designing Women* and *Heart's Afire*.

The Thomasons gave the 1992 Democratic National Convention a more homey and intimate look on television. Instead of televising dull speeches by middle-aged men and women speaking to the convention, the Thomasons focused instead on Bill Clinton dancing with his wife, Hillary Clinton, in a basement room of a department store across the street from Madison Square Garden. Bill and Hillary were shown with

their teen-age daughter, Chelsea, and a group of their closest political friends and supporters, most of them from the Clinton's home state of Arkansas.

When the time came for the final roll call vote that would officially give Bill Clinton the 1992 Democratic nomination, the Thomason team had Bill, Hillary, and Chelsea Clinton begin walking across the street toward the convention hall. It was as if Bill Clinton was walking to meet a divinely-ordained destiny. The TV cameras quickly cut back and forth between the raucously celebrating delegates on the convention floor and the Clinton entourage walking toward Madison Square Garden to acknowledge the nomination. The millions of television viewers watching could virtually feel this warm, fuzzy, magical political moment that had been so carefully crafted by the Thomasons.

More than any convention before or since, the 1992 Democratic National Convention illustrated the extent to which national conventions were no longer political events but had evolved into Hollywood-style television productions. The lift that Democratic nominee Bill Clinton received from the 1992 Democratic National Convention helped him to defeat the elder George Bush and go right into the White House.

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Four years later, incumbent Democratic President Bill Clinton ran for reelection. The 1996 Democratic Convention was held at the United Center, a gigantic sports arena in Chicago. As the convention went into session, it appeared it was going to be the duller national convention ever held. No one had bothered to run against incumbent President Clinton. All the convention delegates had to do was cast all their votes for one man - William Jefferson Clinton.

Anyone who thought the 1996 Democratic Convention was going to be dull was seriously underestimating the theatrical abilities of President Clinton and his Hollywood pals. Instead of flying to Chicago, President Clinton flew instead to Huntington, West Virginia. There he boarded a chartered Amtrak railroad passenger train that slowly made

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its way across the American Midwest toward Chicago. For four days, as the train rolled through picturesque farming country and classic Midwestern small towns, President Clinton generated TV news by appearing at Democratic campaign rallies along the rail route and giving speeches to crowds that gathered around the open observation car on the end of the train.

The train itself was a sight to behold. There were 13 passenger cars pulled by three giant diesel locomotives. As the TV cameras rolled, crowds gathered along the railroad track, some of the onlookers standing in corn fields. At one point, as the train made its way along the edge of the Ohio River, Clinton supporters watched and waved from pleasure boats on the river. Two little girls in ruffled dresses seemed to explode with excitement as the train bearing the president rolled around a long curve. From a pickup truck, a man enthusiastically waved an oversized United States flag.

Suddenly, the place where all the newspaper reporters wanted to be was on the Clinton campaign train rather than at the convention in Chicago. In fact, the most exciting thing on the convention floor in Chicago was the TV clips of the Clinton campaign train that were playing on the giant television screen above the speaker's podium. President Clinton had succeeded in drawing the news media out of the Chicago convention hall, where things were deadly dull, and on to his campaign train, where there was tons of visual excitement ready made for television news.

On the final day of the 1996 Democratic Convention, however, the surge of favorable publicity from the train ride was blunted by a gigantic gaffe. Richard Morris, President Clinton's top campaign adviser, was charged by a tabloid newspaper with consorting with a \$200-an-hour prostitute. Photos of Morris and his call girl socializing together first appeared in the tabloid press, then quickly made their way into the mainstream press. Although Richard Morris immediately resigned his position at the top of the Clinton campaign team, the damage had been done. On the final day of the convention, the press



stopped writing about Bill Clinton and his drive for re-election to the White House. The scandal about the campaign adviser and the call girl totally dominated the political news.

The 1996 Democratic Convention produced mixed results. The publicity triumph of the train ride was eclipsed by political scandal. Despite the negative images generated by the scandal, though, Bill Clinton was easily re-elected to the White House in November of 1996.

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At the Republican National Convention in 2000, protesters threatened to break up the convention and throw the host city of Philadelphia into chaos. It was said that thousands of demonstrators were to descend on the City of Brotherly Love to oppose everything from economic greed by large business corporations, to racial profiling by police departments, and to destruction of the forests by logging companies. It was reported that an 80-foot float of a corporate monster, named Corpzilla, was being constructed to roll down the streets of Philadelphia to shed light on the democracy-devouring nature of international businesses.

John F. Timoney, the Philadelphia police commissioner, said that as many as 10,000 city officers would be on the streets to maintain order during the Republican convention. Timoney pledged that the police would respond with force only if physically assaulted. "We've trained our officers to take verbal taunts, verbal abuse, disparaging remarks regarding their race, ethnicity, their family origin," Timoney said.

The national news media became so enthralled with the proposed protest demonstrations that the main event, the Republican convention, began to pale into insignificance. It is just "one week before the Republican National Convention is to open here," wrote *Washington Post* political columnist David Broder, but "the news is all about the threatened demonstrations - not what will take place inside the hall."

As the convention began, so did the demonstrations. It was a peaceful start. More than 5,000 protesters staged an orderly march down Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia's grandest boulevard.

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The highly-touted Corpzilla finally made an appearance on city streets. This particular march was sanctioned by the city government, which provided portable toilets and traffic control at intersections for the marchers.

On Tuesday, the second day of the convention, conditions on the downtown streets of Philadelphia began to deteriorate. Small groups of protesters, following a carefully prepared plan, staged surprise blockades at major intersections in center city Philadelphia. Traffic was tied up much of the afternoon, but flying squads of Philadelphia police officers quickly hit the streets and arrested the demonstrators. More than 200 protesters were taken into custody, ten of whom were charged with assaulting police officers.

Random acts of vandalism broke out. Protesters stomped on the roof of an automobile parked near Rittenhouse Square, a famous upscale residential area near downtown Philadelphia. Red paint was splashed on the front steps of the district attorney's office. Pro-anarchy signs and slogans were spray-painted on the Municipal Services Building. Four police officers were treated at the hospital after demonstrators threw a toxic substance in their faces. The Fire Department was called to put out the small fires that erupted when protesters torched cloth and paper banners welcoming the Republican convention to Philadelphia.

Then the law enforcement hammer came down. The Philadelphia police raided a warehouse in west Philadelphia where protesters had been building street props and painting signs. Seventy-five persons were detained and charged with misdemeanor offenses. Special city crews worked into the night cleaning up the spilt and sprayed paint left by the demonstrators. Tipped-over trash dumpsters were rapidly righted. Parked city cars and trucks with slashed tires and smashed windshields were quickly towed away. As a result, the buses that were to take the convention delegates from their downtown hotels to the convention hall for the Tuesday evening session were in no way impeded or delayed.

The protests were turning into a running game of cat and mouse, with the Philadelphia police beginning to win the game. As quickly as demonstrators appeared on downtown street corners, a blue wall of officers would surround them. Individual protesters would be arrested one-by-one, with specially-trained arrest officers walking them or carrying them to waiting police vans and busses. There was no tear gas, and there were no wildly swinging billy clubs or other signs of police abuse. In Philadelphia court rooms, local judges set high bails of \$25,000 to \$50,000 to keep the arrested demonstrators from getting back out on the streets until after the convention was over.

As a result of the swift action by police and the rapid arrest of so many demonstrators, the doings at the Republican convention slowly replaced the protests as the main story coming out of Philadelphia. In fact, by the last day of the convention, Philadelphia political leaders were congratulating themselves for successfully containing the demonstrations without violating the civil rights of the demonstrators. The media spotlight switched from the streets of Philadelphia to the speaker's platform in the convention hall.

As the 2000 Republican National Convention officially came to order, party leaders were said to be worried that the Republican nominee designate, George W. Bush, might come across in the glare of national television as poorly informed on major national and international issues. "The Bush team frets that its star, with his boatloads of charm and little else, will reveal too much of himself and convince voters there's nothing there."

So George W. Bush stayed away from the convention hall until the next-to-last day. Taking a cue from Bill Clinton, who as incumbent president rode an Amtrak-powered train to the 1996 Democratic National Convention, Bush set out from Texas on a cross-country tour to Philadelphia. Bush took a jet airplane from one campaign stop to another. Bush's route was carefully planned to include a number of battleground states that were expected to be closely contested in the upcoming November election.

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The result was that persons other than the candidate filled the stage of the 2000 Republican Convention on the first two nights. In an effort to portray Bush as a moderate and the Republican Party as highly-inclusive in racial and gender terms, the speaker lists on Monday and Tuesday nights were filled with minorities and women. Between speeches, George W. Bush, one of the few white males allowed in front of the TV cameras, dropped in by satellite to say a few words from wherever he was that night as he wended his way toward Philadelphia.

The Republican plan to come across as the party of “inclusion” suddenly was working. On Monday night a woman, Laura Bush, George W. Bush’s spouse, gave a short speech. Next on the speaker’s platform in Philadelphia was Colin Powell, the African-American former Army general who served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when George W. Bush’s father was president.

“Governor Bush has reached out to all,” Powell said after receiving a rousing round of applause when walking out on the convention stage. That reaching out included, according to Powell, Americans who were “white, black, Latino, Asian, Native American.” George W. Bush, Powell continued, “has been successful in bringing more and more minorities inside the tent by responding to their deepest needs.”

So it went for three straight nights. From Monday to Wednesday, the convention managers relentlessly pushed the idea that the bad old “mean spirited” Republican Party was a creature of the distant past. All of a sudden, it seemed that national conventions really do matter after all. The news media began describing the 2000 Republican Convention as a big success. It was reported that Bush’s concept of “compassionate conservatism” and the new emphasis on diversity in the Republican Party were getting through to the American people.

Geneva Overholser, a media columnist for the *Washington Post*, lambasted Tom Brokaw of NBC-TV News for not covering Laura Bush’s and Colin Powell’s speeches on the first night of the convention. Overholser argued that something important was happening in Philadelphia. A major political party was propagating its message to

American voters, and Brokaw and NBC had a journalistic obligation to put that new message on national television.

The most important event at a national convention is the Thursday night acceptance speech by the party candidate for president. It is the one event that is covered live and unedited by all three major television networks. At the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia in 2000, George W. Bush's acceptance speech was regarded as even more important than usual. Bush had a reputation for being a bumbling speaker and for occasionally misusing the English language in weird ways. If ever a situation appeared ripe for a major presidential candidate gaffe, it was Bush's acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia in 2000.

Bush opened with a joke. "It's great to be in Philadelphia," he said. "Ben Franklin was here. So was Thomas Jefferson. And of course, George Washington. His friends called him George W."

After the polite laughter died away, Bush got down to serious business. The first part of his speech was filled with catch phrases that provided a glowing vision of the future. The nation needed to "seize this moment of American promise." Every American was to participate in "the promise of prosperity." Bush said there must be "for every child, an education." He pledged to stop "the steady erosion of American power" that had occurred under President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore. "They have not led in foreign affairs and military preparedness," Bush charged. "We will!"

The gigantic conventional hall, the First Union Center, was darkened for Bush's acceptance speech. To provide a break from his constantly "talking head," the television cameras would periodically turn to the arena, where bright spotlights were sweeping back and forth across the audience. This technique was particularly used during those moments in the speech when Bush's remarks had produced a moment of wild applause and cheering.

As his speech developed, Bush did a good job of mixing his moderate proposals with some of the more conservative positions of the

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Republican Party. He spoke the motto of the Civil Rights Movement, “We shall overcome,” but then added the idea that the government must not overly coddle those who need help succeeding in American society. Bush said the United States should not resort to “the soft bigotry of low expectations.”

At times Bush’s speech ranged from moderate to almost liberal. The Republicans are “the party, not of repose, but of reform,” Bush said. He called for making “prescription drugs available and affordable for senior citizens.” As for the Social Security retirement program, Bush promised to protect older Americans by saying emphatically: “Social Security. No changes. No deductions. No way!” Bush strongly endorsed the Head Start program, which provides free pre-schooling for poor children.

Near the end of his speech, George W. Bush called on the American people to be something more than the wealthiest nation on the planet. “Let’s not live in an age that is rich in possessions,” Bush concluded, “and weak in ideas.”

The press and pundit response to Bush’s acceptance speech was overwhelmingly favorable. David Broder of the *Washington Post* praised the speech for its “exceptional eloquence” and for producing a Republican Party “enjoying unusual unity.” The *Philadelphia Inquirer* described the speech as “renovating” the Republican Party image. The *Inquirer* concluded that “the convention portrait of [Bush] as warm, genuine, decisive, and direct is what America sees.”

The end result was that Bush and the Republicans dodged every bullet which the political pundits said was aimed at them during their convention week in Philadelphia. The street protesters were successfully brought under control and did not “shut down” the convention. The moderate and conservative wings of the party were welded tightly together rather than warring with each other as at Republican conventions in the past. The convention projected an image of “diversity” and “inclusions” for the Republican Party. Finally, the acceptance speech, instead of being the anticipated gaffe-filled disaster,

turned out to be almost exceptional, even in the eyes of a supposedly liberal and Democratic-leaning press.

The 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia appeared to mark a renaissance of the idea that political party national conventions are an important part of the presidential election process. Helping this idea along was Jim Nicholson, Chair of the Republican National Committee. He repeatedly cited a University of Michigan study that concluded that 22 percent of the voters in presidential elections make their final decision based on what they see at the national conventions. Among certain other groups, such as women and minorities, more than 30 percent use the national conventions to decide their vote.

“Conventions remain very relevant and very important,” Nicholson said to anyone who would listen.

The image, purpose, and effectiveness of the national conventions emerged in great shape from the 2000 Republican convention in Philadelphia.

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To paraphrase the poet: “Does one kiss a convention make?”

That appeared to be what happened at the 2000 Democratic National Convention. Albert Gore, Jr., vice president of the United States, walked on to the convention stage to accept the Democratic Party nomination for president. The first thing he did was walk up to his wife, Tipper Gore, and give her a long, romantic, Hollywood-style kiss on the lips.

What a kiss! It was spirited. It was passionate. Al and Tipper Gore clung together for what seemed an eternity. Despite being in front of 4,370 cheering convention delegates and on network television, the Gores were behaving as if they were the only two people in the world who mattered to each other.

In one sense, it was the cheapest kind of political theatrics. The long passionate kiss between a man and a woman has been a staple of the legitimate theater, Hollywood movies, and television dramas. In the

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context of the year 2000 presidential election, however, the Al and Tipper super kiss was a masterstroke. It solidly attacked the news-media-driven image of Al Gore being wooden, mechanical, and passionless.

The kiss became the highlight and most memorable event of the 2000 Democratic National Convention. It sent Al Gore off into the general election campaign with a nice bounce in the polls. The kiss ended up being for nothing, however. Al Gore won the popular vote in the 2000 presidential election, but a Supreme Court decision and the Electoral College gave the White House to Republican George W. Bush.

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If a big kiss was no longer appropriate, would a snappy military salute be just as effective? That is what happened at the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

U.S. Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, the Democratic nominee designate, was a Navy Seal during the Vietnam War. To remind everyone of his military service in an elite and highly-trained combat unit, he walked on to the speaker's platform, looked directly into the television camera, came to attention, gave a crisp military salute, and said: "John Kerry reporting for duty."

The salute was a great ploy at the national convention, but it was not enough to win John Kerry the presidency. He was narrowly defeated by incumbent Republican President George W. Bush, who was re-elected to a second term.

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As the national conventions shifted from nominating conventions to ratifying conventions, live television coverage of the conventions was significantly reduced. The major television networks were not much interested in giving round-the-clock coverage to political events which were, in essence, doing nothing more than advertising the winner of the presidential primaries the previous winter and spring. In hopes of at least drawing something of a viewing audience, the two major political



parties, the Democratic and the Republican, began scheduling all the major events at their respective conventions in the prime-time hours of the early evening.

Even with this adjustment, the TV networks continued to reduce live coverage of the national conventions. By the early 2000s, the networks and the political parties had agreed upon a mutually-acceptable time schedule. On Monday evening of convention week, a big opening speech called the keynote address was given by a leading political personality. Tuesday evening was set aside for additional speech-making, often with Hollywood celebrities and sports stars who were members of the political party. These Tuesday evening performances often were built around a political theme, such as cutting taxes or enacting gun-control legislation, that the particular political party wanted to emphasize.

On Wednesday evening, the political parties staged the nominating speeches for the various candidates for president, followed by the actual casting of ballots by the delegates and the “official” declaration of the winner. Then, on Thursday evening, the party nominee for president gave his official speech accepting the party nomination.

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As the major TV networks abandoned round-the-clock coverage of the convention, so-called “New Media” outlets gleefully took the networks’ place. Cable channels and internet news broadcasters scrambled to provide 24-hour coverage of actual events at the convention along with detailed political analysis and discussion.

This trend became particularly apparent at the Republican National Convention and the Democratic National Convention in 2000.

The New Media were particularly good at tailoring their convention coverage to specific audiences. In many cases, these were audiences that did not pay much attention to politics and election campaigns. Thus the Lifetime cable channel beamed its convention shows at women. Cable’s MTV brought political coverage to its mainly under 25-years-old audience. Even the Comedy Central cable outlet put on a satirical

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news program, *The Daily Show*, that conveyed real political information to its under 35-years-old viewers.

This type of news coverage is called “narrowcasting” and is aimed at relatively small but important “niche audiences.” As for those who wanted 24-hours-a-day coverage of the conventions aimed at general audiences, there was always cable’s CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News.

Even more narrowly focused on particular audiences were the 40 dot-coms that made up Internet Alley at the 2000 Republican and Democratic conventions. Conveniently grouped on media pavilions adjacent to the convention halls, a number of these political web sites were reaching surprisingly large audiences. America Online (AOL), the internet giant, boasted 16 million online subscribers to its news service. Some cyberspace nerds said web political coverage “has just exploded” and referred to the 2000 Republican National Convention, because it was held first, as “the first Internet Convention.”

The 2000 Republican and Democratic national conventions marked the landmark moment when the time came to kiss the major television networks goodbye and let them run their situation comedies and sporting events at the same time the national conventions are taking place. The political parties and their candidates for president should regain complete control of the agenda at the national conventions and shape those agendas to fit the political party’s needs and not the television networks’ needs. The print press, cable TV, and internet news are all available to convey the political parties’ messages during convention week to the American people, with detailed political analysis thrown in for good measure.

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Although political party national conventions are declining in importance, these gigantic party confabs are in no danger of disappearing. They continue to constitute a marvelous four-day television advertisement for the political party and its nominee for president of the United States. Perhaps the best way to look at the evolved national conventions is as presidential candidate

“coronations.” The conventions come with all the glitter, pomp, and familiar ceremony associated with royal coronations.

Many things of political value continue to occur at the national conventions. Younger politicians in the political party get an opportunity to give a speech or preside over an important event, thus gaining nationwide television exposure. It is good that rank-and-file party members from all the 50 states come together in one place every four years and get to know each other and talk party issues. Furthermore, the national conventions are a big reunion event for the leading members of the national and international press. The newspaper scribes and television pundits come to the national conventions to visit and confer with each other as much as cover a major political event.

The high-powered Washington, D.C., lobbyists have discovered the national conventions. They come in hordes to the convention city and throw elaborate parties for the delegates, many of whom are members of Congress, state governors, state legislators, and state party chairpersons. There is hardly a better place than a national convention for a lobbyist to wine and dine, and gain influence with, large numbers of important elected officials all at the same time.

There are a number of good reasons for keeping the national conventions, but none of them have anything to do with actually choosing the person who will be the party nominee for president. That takes place in the primaries and caucuses. A number of years ago, there was a television commercial in which an actor appeared wearing the white clothing of a medical doctor. “I’m not a doctor,” the actor turned medical man said into the camera, “but I play one on TV.” It is now the same way with the national political conventions. They are no longer significant national political events, but they play one on TV.