

16. 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 was going to 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.¹

Political scientists in the year 2000 tended to describe the national conventions as ratifying conventions instead of nominating conventions. The conventions simply ratified the candidate choice made 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.

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.

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 the six presidential primaries held by the Democratic Party that year. Yes, folks, there was a time when there were

only six 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 went into session, it was common knowledge among 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 A 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 American history.

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 national television for everyone to see.

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. But, 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 off the streets.

The major television networks, suspecting that violence might break out, had placed their TV cameras out on the streets as well as in the convention hall. As the battle heated up, television images of the rioting students and the retaliating police officers were beamed across the country.

As the convention went on, 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. 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 1960.²

There was a major conclusion to be drawn from the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Both political parties saw all too clearly that national conventions have to be tightly controlled and carefully regulated. Letting a national convention go 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 see 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 presidential primaries. 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.

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. 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.³

The press quickly labeled such major mistakes at national conventions as gaffes. There was a big one at the 1980 Democratic Convention when incumbent Democratic President Jimmy Carter was being renominated 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. Teddy Kennedy was the man whom Carter had easily defeated in the 1980 Democratic primaries. At the Democratic Convention, every time Carter put out 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 was never 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.⁴

Things can go wrong at Republican national conventions as well as at Democratic ones. In 1992 the Republicans met 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 GOP 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.⁵

Buchanan was just getting warmed up. He accused Bill Clinton and his wife, Hilary Rodham 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 schools, women in [military] combat units – that’s change, all right, but not the kind of change America needs.⁶

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.⁷

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.

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 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, Hilary Clinton, in a basement room of a department store across the street from Madison Square Garden. Bill and Hilary 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 and Hilary 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. Television viewers 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.⁸ The lift that Democratic nominee Bill Clinton received from the 1992 Democratic Convention helped to carry him right into the White House.

Four years later, incumbent Democratic President Bill Clinton ran for re-election. 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 dullest 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 started making 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. Crowds gathered along the railroad track, some of the onlookers standing in cornfields. At one point, as the train made its way along the edge of the Ohio River, Clinton supporters watched and waved from pleasure boats out 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.

But, on the final day of the 1996 Democratic Convention, 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 and 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.⁹

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

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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 Democrats and the Republicans, began scheduling all the major events at their respective conventions in the prime time hours in the early evening.

Even with this adjustment, the TV networks continued to cut back their live coverage of the national conventions. By the year 2000, 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.

Then, on Thursday evening, the party nominee for President gave his official speech accepting the party nomination.

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.

And 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.

So 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.¹⁰

1. For a description of national conventions when they actually nominated the major party candidates for president, see Paul T. David, Richard M. Goldman, and Richard C. Bain, *The Politics Of National Party Conventions* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1960).

2. For detailed description and analysis of the 1968 Democratic National Convention, see Chapter 9, "The Chicago Convention: The Furies In The Street," in Theodore H. White, *The Making Of The President 1968* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1970), pp. 321-389.

3. See Chapter 7, "Confrontation At Miami," in Theodore H. White, *The Making Of The President 1972* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1973), pp. 209-255.

4. Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Blue Smoke And Mirrors: How Reagan Won And Why Carter Lost The Election Of 1980* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1981), pp. 191-196.

5. "Reagan Looks At Triumphs In Past, Future," *Denver Post*, August 18, 1992, p. 1A.

6. Thomas B. Edsall, "The Republicans' Value-Added Strategy," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, August 24-30, 1992, p. 15.

7. "Ex-Bush Adversary Jumps On President's Bandwagon," *Colorado Sp0rings Gazette Telegraph*, August 18, 1992, p. A3.

8. Margaret Carlson, "Just A Couple Of Hicks With 40 Million Viewers," *Time*, January 18, 1993, p. 27. Stephen J. Wayne, *The Road To The White House 1992* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 161. Robert D. Loevy, *The Flawed Path To The Presidency 1992* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 174-175.

9. For a full discussion of the 1996 Democratic National Convention, see Robert D. Loevy, *The Manipulated Path To The White House 1996* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), pp. 245-259.

10. Richard Cohen, "A Political Theme Park," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, September 2-8, 1989, p. 27.