

## **18. A KISS IN TIME**

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

That appeared to be what happened at the year 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. But 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.

And what a kiss. It was spirited. It was passionate. Al and Tipper Gore clung together for what seemed to be 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. But, in the context of the year 2000 situation in the Democratic Party, the Al-Tipper super kiss was a masterstroke. It solidly attacked the news media driven image of Al Gore being wooden and mechanical and passionless. And, perhaps more importantly, it strongly countered the taint of marital infidelity that had hung over the Democratic Party ever since the President Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair.

The kiss came just in the nick of time. The year 2000 Democratic National Convention had gotten off to a stumbling start. The first two days of the convention appeared to have hurt Al Gore in his quest for the presidency rather than to have helped him.

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It was the week before the opening of the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, California. The convention was scheduled to begin on Monday, August 14, 2000. Two young women secured ropes to the rooftop of a 15-story downtown hotel and then dangled the ropes down the side of the building. Off the rooftop the young protesters went, scaling down the ropes and unfurling a giant American flag. The stars on the flag had been changed to the corporate logos of major United States industries. On the stripes the word “SOLD” was printed in giant letters. The flag illustrated the charge that government in the United States had been put under the control of corporate interests in return for campaign contributions.

The first salvo had been fired in the battle between the Los Angeles police and the same kinds of demonstrators who made their presence felt at the Republican convention two weeks earlier in Philadelphia. Thousands of protesters, loosely organized and supporting a wide variety of political causes, surged into the

City of Angels in an effort to disrupt, or at least shame, the Democratic convention.

Corpzilla, the 80-foot long truck borne monster that satirized corporate greed during the Republican convention, failed to make the trip from Philadelphia to L.A. But he was scheduled to be replaced by the “Million Billionaire” march, a parade designed to further satirize the undue influence of wealthy political contributors in United States election campaigns. And the protesters hit the streets in a wide variety of sensational costumes. One young woman, demonstrating for “Free Speech,” wore an American flag blouse along with a surprisingly realistic Statue-of-Liberty mask and headdress.

And so it went. Name a cause, and it likely had advocates trying to attract attention on the streets of downtown Los Angeles. Stopping police brutality, ending the death penalty, closing down the sweatshops, caring for Iraqi children victimized by United Nations economic sanctions - these causes and more came to make their case. There was just one problem. So many disparate groups were competing for media attention that, for the most part, the messages from the demonstrators were not getting through to the general public.

At times the congestion of people and ideas was laughable. One evening a group of youthful protesters surged along a downtown street and ran right into the midst of a march for women’s rights. The collision of the two groups at least

illustrated the concept of anarchy if not advancing it. Ironically, both the youths and the women allowed the police to start directing traffic and get the two groups out of their unintended pedestrian gridlock.

As far as the news media were concerned, all of this attempted ruckus rated a big “ho-hum.” The national newspapers and television networks had covered exactly the same story two weeks earlier in Philadelphia. Nothing bores the working press more than having to tell the same story twice. Furthermore, it was obvious that, just as happened in Philadelphia, the police were going to rigidly control the demonstrators and not let them get anywhere near either the convention hall or the delegates.

And that was how it turned out. At the end of convention week, with the Democratic delegates starting to head for home, the Los Angeles police declared themselves the clear victors over anyone who had intended to disrupt either the Democratic convention or orderly life on the downtown streets of the city. The techniques employed were the same ones used in Philadelphia - thousands of police swarming the downtown area and the instant arrest of any person or group that started blocking traffic or otherwise breaking the law. The news media, which had given extensive coverage to the protester hi-jinx at the Republican convention in Philadelphia, took only passing notice when the show played second-time-

around in Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup>

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The setting was a brightly lighted cement-walled tunnel leading to the Staples Center in Los Angeles, the site of the year 2000 Democratic National Convention. The tunnel had a clean but colorless look, not at all a warm and inviting place to be. At various critical points along the tunnel, TV cameras were strategically placed so that the image of a person walking through the tunnel could be instantly flashed to television viewers throughout the United States.

Down the tunnel came William Jefferson Clinton, the outgoing President of the United States. He was on his way to the convention floor to say a tearful goodbye to the political party in whose name he had governed from the White House for almost eight years. It was the two-term limit on the presidential office, and not unpopularity with the voters, that was putting Bill Clinton out of the presidency. As the President made his way through the tunnel toward the convention hall, the TV cameras periodically cut away to scenes of the convention delegates cheering wildly for him.

As Bill Clinton walked down the tunnel, short phrases praising his presidency were scrolled across the bottom of the television screen. One example: “The most diverse President’s cabinet in history.” Clearly Clinton and his advisers

had wanted to recreate the magic of Bill, Hillary, and Chelsea Clinton walking to the 1992 Democratic convention in New York. That was the convention at which Bill Clinton first received the Democratic nomination for president.

But the magic of that 1992 walk to destiny was not successfully duplicated in Los Angeles in the year 2000. For one thing, Bill Clinton was by himself. One wondered why Hillary and Chelsea had been left out of this particular walk. Some speculated it was because Hillary's and Chelsea's presence would have been an unpleasant reminder of Clinton's straying from his marriage vows.

Once on the podium at the Staples Center, President Clinton gave a 13-page speech mainly designed to burnish his record in office. Only four paragraphs of the speech mentioned Al Gore, the Vice President who would be carrying President Clinton's record to the voters in the upcoming November general election. The press came down hard on Bill Clinton for touting his own alleged accomplishments so heavily and barely mentioning Al Gore. "Like too much else in Clinton's presidency," wrote David Broder of the *Washington Post*, "this final speech was ultimately a self-indulgent essay on one subject: himself."<sup>2</sup>

Clinton's self-aggrandizing was so obvious that aides to the Gore campaign felt constrained to leak to the news media their annoyance with the President for playing such a leading role at the convention. It was time, the Gore campaign

hinted strongly, for Bill Clinton to get out of the spotlight and let Gore take over. President Clinton's big night at the 2000 Democratic convention was supposed to represent the "passing of the torch" from Bill Clinton to Al Gore. But it was all too obvious that Bill Clinton did not want to let go of the torch. Not at all.<sup>3</sup>

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Tuesday night, the second night of the Democratic convention, was scheduled to be "Kennedy Night." A giant photograph of John F. Kennedy, President of the United States from 1961 to 1963, was projected on the giant television screen behind the speaker's platform at the Staples Center. The young President, one of the Democratic Party's most popular historical heroes, had been killed by an assassin's bullet after slightly less than three years in the White House.

The first speaker was Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, President Kennedy's daughter. She introduced her uncle, U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, the former President's brother. Ted Kennedy worked hard to bring back the charisma of the Kennedy years. "It was here, in this City of Angels, on a warm summer night 40 years ago," Ted Kennedy reminisced, "that America first looked across the New Frontier." The New Frontier was John F. Kennedy's ambitious proposed program to correct "unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty," Ted Kennedy said.<sup>4</sup>

In the year 2000, did the Democrats really have to go back 40 years, to the early 1960s, to celebrate their past? That seemed to be the case. The three previous Democratic presidents - Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, and Lyndon Johnson - had all left office under a cloud. Bill Clinton had suffered the indignity of the Monica Lewinsky affair. Jimmy Carter had been plagued by double-digit inflation and American diplomats taken hostage in Iran. Lyndon Johnson had borne the burden of the unpopular Vietnam War. Only John F. Kennedy stood out as the most recent truly popular Democratic President.

Political commentators were quick to point out what was going on. The Republican convention had been aimed at moderate independent voters, not the Republican “base” of conservative voters. Polls showed that George W. Bush enjoyed broad support in the right-wing of his political party. That freed Bush to go after middle-of-the-road voters who would be critically needed to win the general election in November. Thus the Republican convention came off as a celebration of economic compassion and racial inclusion rather than being pitched to conservative ideology.

But Al Gore enjoyed no such strong support from the “base” of his political party, the liberal left-wing. Whereas George W. Bush steered his convention to the middle, Al Gore had to force his convention to the left. Polls revealed that Gore



was not very popular with the most dedicated Democratic voters. Even more damaging, polls revealed that George W. Bush was much more popular with Republicans than Al Gore was with Democrats. The result was that the Gore convention managers felt compelled to go to the Kennedy legacy in an effort to shore up Al Gore's identification with the Democratic Party's left-wing roots.

The first night of the 2000 Democratic National Convention was dominated by Bill Clinton. The second night was dominated by the Kennedy legacy. When was it going to be Al Gore's turn?

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The kiss saved all.

After giving his wife Tipper that big kiss on the lips, Albert Gore, Jr., stepped to the speaker's podium and gave one of the best speeches of his political career. "I am standing here as my own man," Gore told the convention and the country, "and I want you to know who I am." Thus did Al Gore attempt to separate himself once and for all from the scandals of the Clinton Administration and begin to build a unique political image for himself.

The most effective part of the speech was Gore's pledge that he would represent the cause of "the people versus the powerful." He called for a "better, fairer, more prosperous America," but with the proviso that "our prosperity

enriches not just the few but all working families.”

In a ringing conclusion to his speech, Gore set what would become the main theme of his campaign to win the November election:

“[The presidency] is the only job in the Constitution that is charged with the responsibility of fighting for all the people - not just the wealthy or powerful - all the people. Especially those who need a voice, those who need a champion, those who need to be lifted up, so they are never left behind.”<sup>5</sup>

It was interesting that Al Gore seemed to be going out of his way not to directly criticize George W. Bush, his Republican opponent for the presidency. That was undoubtedly a wise decision, given Bush’s strong performance at the Republican convention two weeks earlier and the favorable ratings Bush was getting in the polls. Instead of attacking Bush head-on, Gore decided to try to sell the idea that putting the Republicans back in the White House would cost the American people many of the hard-won gains of the past. That would be gains such as Social Security retirement, Medicare health care for the elderly, and liberal public welfare programs.

Gore first established this campaign approach when he stopped for a political rally in Missouri as he made his way to Los Angeles for the convention. George W. Bush was a good man, Gore said of the Republican presidential

nominee. Then Gore added: “I’ll never attack [him] personally. [But] the American people need to know the specifics of how the American people would be affected if the other side won.”<sup>6</sup>

As the 2000 Democratic National Convention came to an end, Al Gore flew to Wisconsin and climbed aboard the Mark Twain, an old-style 120-foot Mississippi River paddle wheel boat decorated with bright white paint and two big smoke stacks. Red, white, and blue bunting festooned the railings of the boat. A large sign on the top deck read: “Setting Course For America’s Future.”

It was the beginning of a four-day, 390-mile float down the river to carry the Gore campaign to the heart of the American Midwest. Gore and his campaign entourage disembarked at a series of Norman Rockwell-style river towns so Gore could shake hands, chat with the voters, give short speeches, and make television news in unusually picturesque settings. It was the Al Gore version of Bill Clinton’s exciting “Buscapade” bus tour of the Northeast and the Midwest following Clinton’s nomination in New York City in 1992.

There was good news for Al Gore as he campaigned his way down the Mississippi River. Despite the stumbling start, political commentators were calling the 2000 Democratic National Convention a success. His acceptance speech was being showered with particularly high praise. The decision not to harshly attack

George W. Bush had paid off. Pollsters reported that Al Gore's favorable ratings had gone up during the Democratic convention while George W. Bush's had held steady. Al Gore emerged from his convention with his political party united and his image greatly improved. Al Gore suddenly had credible prospects for defeating George W. Bush and being elected President of the United States in the upcoming November election.

Best of all, Albert Gore, Jr., had developed a strong theme on which to base his drive for the White House. It would be Al Gore fighting for the people - the common man - the little guy. In a little Mississippi River town, ironically named Clinton, Iowa, Gore pounded away on his new theme. "I may not be the most exciting politician," he told a crowd of geographical Clintonites, "but I will work hard for you every single day and I will never let you down.... I'm running for President because I wanna fight for you. I wanna fight for your families."<sup>7</sup>

### **Endnotes - Chapter 18:**

1. "L.A. Cops' Victory Over Protests Puts Polish Back On Badge," *Denver Post*, August 19, 2000, p. 12A.
2. David Broder, "Time To Change The Subject," *Denver Post*, August 16, 2000, p. 11B.
3. Marc Lacey, "Repentant Clinton Reviews His Presidency," *New York Times*, August 11, 2000. John F. Harris and Ceci Connolly, "Clinton Passes Torch; Gore Get Fired Up," *Denver Post*, August 16, 2000, p. 8A.

4. Richard L. Berke, "Kennedy's Liberal Legacy Revived," *Denver Post*, August 16, 2000, p. 1A.
5. Albert Gore, Jr., acceptance speech quotes from author's notes, CBS-TV News coverage, 2000 Democratic National Convention. Also see Fred Brown, "Gore Stands 'As My Own Man,'" *Denver Post*, August 18, 2000, p. 1A.
6. David Espo, "Clinton Goes To Bat For Gore," *Denver Post*, August 15, 2000, p. 1A.
7. Ceci Connolly, "Gore Warms Up Clinton (Iowa)," *Washington Post*, August 21, 2000, p. A4.