

## **17. IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY RIOTING**

The model for the year 2000 Republican National Convention was not a previous national convention. It was a protest riot in the city of Seattle, Washington, which took place in 1999.

The World Trade Organization, a monitoring group that sets international trade policies, chose Seattle as the site for one of its periodic meetings. National leaders and trade experts from all over the planet gathered to interact with one another, hold working sessions, and amend trading rules and regulations. The focus of all the activity was downtown Seattle, where delegates to the meeting were staying and meeting in an area of fine hotels and prestigious office buildings.

But along with the official delegates to the World Trade Organization meeting came massive numbers of mostly youthful protesters. These street demonstrators, many of them college students or recently graduated college students, opposed the World Trade Organization on grounds its policies did not provide adequately for poor persons living in underdeveloped nations. The protesters also were concerned that the World Trade Organization's members did not show sufficient concern for the environment.

What were supposed to be peaceful demonstrations and marches quickly got out of hand. The protesters filled the streets of downtown Seattle, blocking delegates to the World Trade Organization confab from leaving their hotels and getting to their various meeting places. Then the violence began. Fires were started. Plate glass windows in downtown shops and stores were smashed. In one gripping television news report, a hippie-looking youth was seen throwing a giant metal trash can through the plate glass window of a Starbucks coffee shop, smashing the

window into thousands of pieces of shattered glass.

When order was finally restored in Seattle, there was general agreement in the press that the protesters had achieved their goal. The World Trade Organization meetings had been “shut down,” at least for a while. The demonstrators’ criticisms of the World Trade Organization had been thoroughly aired in the news media. And the city of Seattle and the state of Washington, along with their leading elected officials, had been portrayed as unable to maintain law and order on Seattle city streets.

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By mid-July of 2000, with the opening of the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia just two weeks away, it had become clear that many of the same protesters who broke up the World Trade meetings in Seattle were going to try to do the same thing to the GOP Convention in the City of Brotherly Love. It was said that thousands of demonstrators were to descend on Philadelphia to protest everything from economic greed by large business corporations to racial profiling by police departments to destruction of the forests by logging companies.

It was reliably 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. Corpzilla’s tooth-filled head was to rest on the cab of an 18-wheel truck. Urging Corpzilla on from the flatbed of the truck was to be a statue of a standing pig, dressed in formal wear and with pockets overflowing with money. The pig was to symbolize the typical corporate executive.

Scary stories began to appear in the national press about the planned tactics for disrupting

the Republican convention. “Shadow conventions” would be staged at which scholars and other experts would counter the ideas and issues being put forth by the Republican Party for the upcoming presidential election campaign. “Bushvilles,” plywood and tar paper shacks for the homeless, were to be constructed to remind everyone of the Hoovervilles of the Great Depression. Broad Street, the main north-south street in Philadelphia, was to be filled with thousands of marching demonstrators, who would then blockade the streets in the downtown area and force a bitter, and perhaps brutal, confrontation with Philadelphia police.<sup>i</sup>

The city government in Philadelphia had arranged for the payment of millions of dollars to the Republican Party in return for the 2000 Republican convention being held in the City of Brotherly Love. National conventions bring millions of dollars to the local economies of the cities that host them. Philadelphia city leaders did not want to see their large investment in the Republican National Convention made worthless by rioting demonstrators frightening away free-spending convention delegates and news media correspondents. Police officials in Philadelphia moved to isolate and control the protesters.

The leaders of the various organizations that demonstrated in Seattle were put under police surveillance. Fenced-in areas far from the convention hall were built and designated official “protest pits.” The authorities hoped to confine the demonstrators to these areas, completely separating them from the delegates and keeping them far away from the downtown area with its heavy traffic and all-too- blockable streets. The Philadelphia City Council passed a law making it illegal to wear a mask. This prevented protesters from hiding their faces while committing crimes of vandalism and thereby avoiding arrest and conviction if their photographs were taken.

John F. Timony, 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.<sup>ii</sup> The American Civil Liberties Union became so concerned about the proposed restrictions on protesting at the year 2000 national conventions that it filed a court suit to guarantee wider access and freedom of movement to the demonstrators.

All the hype about protests and demonstrations prior to the 2000 Republican convention put pressure on the protesters as well as the Philadelphia city police. The demonstrations in Seattle had been so successful and so disruptive that the same result was expected at the national conventions. If the thousands of protesters advancing on Philadelphia failed to create a melee similar to Seattle and did not shutdown the Republican National Convention, the demonstrator's efforts would be defined as a complete failure.<sup>iii</sup>

The delegates began to arrive in Philadelphia the weekend before the Republican Convention began. Many of them saw that someone had posted vertical signs emblazoned with the word "RESIST" on telephone poles in part of the city. As is typical at all modern national conventions, the Secret Service did a complete sweep of the convention hall, named the First Union Center, looking for explosives. Bomb-sniffing dogs led by federal agents in dark suits searched every corner of the giant arena. The dogs and men also checked out the small city of white tents erected around the arena to house the news media and other support activities. Those were not the only tents in the city. An encampment of welfare rights protesters was located in

North Philadelphia on the other side of town from the convention hall.<sup>iv</sup>

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.”<sup>v</sup>

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. The highly-touted Corpzilla finally made an appearance on city streets. This particular march, called the Unity 2000 rally, had been sanctioned by the city government, which provided portable toilets and traffic control at intersections for the marchers.

But 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.

But the disturbances lasted long enough for the news media to get photographs and live video of the street action. A full-color photo printed on the front page of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* showed a mounted policeman on a white horse trying to push a group of protesters down a street in front of Philadelphia City Hall.<sup>vi</sup>

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. And 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 Tuesday evening session of the convention at the First Union Center were in no way impeded or delayed.<sup>vii</sup>

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, as there had been in Seattle, and there were no wildly swinging billy clubs or other signs of police abuse.<sup>viii</sup> 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.<sup>ix</sup>

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 at the First Union Center.

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As the 2000 Republican National Convention officially came to order, party leaders were said to be worried that 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]." The result was that 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 Convention, Bush set out from Texas on a cross-country tour to Philadelphia. 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.<sup>x</sup>

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. In 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 Laura Bush, George W. Bush’s spouse, gave a short speech, after which George W. himself made a remote television appearance from a school classroom in Westerville, Ohio. Candidate Bush talked about his plans to reform schooling in the United States so that every child, even one in far-away Westerville, gets a decent education. 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.”

“Some call it compassionate conservatism,” the popular former Army general enthused. “It’s just about caring for people. He can do the same thing as President. He will bring to the White House that same passion for inclusion. I know he can help bridge our racial divides.”<sup>xi</sup>

Powell supported a number of ideas at the 2000 Republican Convention which clashed mightily with traditional Republican Party points of view. The GOP had long advocated more individual initiative and fewer U.S. Government giveaway programs. Powell called for providing every young person in the nation with quality health care, he praised immigrants from foreign lands for their contributions to American society, and he urged that the United States “ensure a diverse college population.” In one stirring line, Powell seemed to call for a children’s



welfare state when he said: “Children are a gift from God, not to their parents, but to all of us. They belong to us all.”<sup>xii</sup>

And so it went for three straight nights. From Monday to Wednesday the GOP convention managers relentlessly pushed the idea that the bad old “mean spirited” Republican Party was a creature of the distant past. Jose Rivera, chairman of the Republican National Hispanic Assembly, began his speech to the convention by talking in Spanish. Joe Rogers, the African-American Lieutenant Governor of Colorado, described George W. Bush as “one of the most inclusive governors in America.”<sup>xiii</sup>

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.<sup>xiv</sup>

This runaway Republican success produced the obvious response from the Democrats. Traditionally, at least up until 1992, the opposition party remained silent during a political party’s national convention and let the convening party monopolize the national news media stage for a week. But things changed in the bitter struggle between Bush the elder and Bill Clinton in 1992. Both parties decided it was just too risky to let the other party have the national

news media all to itself for an entire week. The opposition party attack dogs were unleashed early and often as the tradition of convention week civility went right out the window.

On Tuesday, the second day of the Republican Convention, Democratic President Bill Clinton gave a speech in Tampa, Florida. He lambasted the Republicans for wrapping a bunch of wrongheaded policies up in a “pretty package” called “compassionate conservatism.”

“Their strategy is to talk about compassion and all,” Clinton said. “And it’s a brilliant strategy. It’s a pretty package, and they’re hoping if they wrap it tight enough, nobody will open it before Christmas.”

President Clinton was joined in criticizing the Republicans by his spouse, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. Campaigning for a U.S. Senate seat in New York state, Hillary Rodham Clinton described the GOP convention as a “scripted show” that was being used to obscure the policy differences between the Republican and Democratic parties. She said the Republicans were emitting “soothing sounds” for poor and minority Americans but that, in the end, the Republicans would provide only “empty rhetoric.”<sup>xv</sup>

Far away from the First Union Center sports arena, which belonged exclusively to the Republicans, the Democrats set up what could be called their “anti-convention.” In a Sheet Metal Workers union hall in Philadelphia, the Democrats paraded before the press and the TV cameras a series of Democratic elected officials who directly attacked the ideas and themes being so effectively presented at the Republican convention. Maryland’s Democratic Governor, Parris N. Glendening, stopped by to hurl barbs at the GOP, as did Democratic U.S. Senators Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont and Tom Harkin of Iowa.

To make certain news reporters and photographers found their way to the anti-convention

in the union hall, the Democrats operated a large bus nicknamed “The Rolling Donkey.”

Members of the press who accepted a ride were offered a free baseball cap with the Democratic donkey logo on it.

There was a cyberspace angle to the Democrats’ anti-convention. In a “war room” in the union hall, a group of Democratic Party Internet specialists perched in front of a bank of computers and maintained a group of Web sites designed to rebut what was happening at the Republican convention across town. Democratic Web sites tended to have imaginative names. One site, which alleged that George W. Bush had a poor record on environmental issues while serving as Governor of Texas, was named “IknowwhatyoudidinTexas.com.” Internet-types who went to the Web site were rewarded with derogatory images of (1) Bush, (2) large piles of cash symbolizing political contributions from polluters, and (3) industrial smokestacks belching giant clouds of black smoke.<sup>xvi</sup>

The Democratic Party anti-convention suggested that, even if the news media were not taking the Republican convention very seriously, Al Gore and the Democrats certainly were.

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The most important thing 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 the year 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 First Union Center in Philadelphia.

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 had 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." And 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 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 Republican Party. He spoke the motto of the Civil Rights Movement, "We shall overcome." But then he 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 was 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!” And Bush strongly endorsed the Head Start program which provides free pre-schooling for poor children.

But at other times Bush reminded his audience that “conservative” was still a major part of “compassionate conservative.” He remarked that U.S. Government budget surpluses were “not the government’s money” but “the people’s money.” And he called for capping income tax rates at just one-third of a person’s income, no matter how wealthy that person might be.

Throughout the speech, George W. Bush went out of his way to never smile or grin. It was well known that Bush, when smiling, could get a sort of “smirking” look on his face that suggested he was not taking things seriously. The result was that Bush had a deeply committed tone to his talk, a tone that convinced both the delegates in the hall and the television viewers watching at home that he sincerely meant everything he said.

As required by custom and campaign necessity, Bush periodically jabbed at Albert Gore, Jr., his Democratic opponent in the upcoming November general election. Gore had labeled a number of Bush’s proposals, particularly those for cutting taxes, as “risky schemes.” Bush attempted to turn-the-tables on Gore, pointing out that Gore would have attacked all the courageous U.S. Government programs of the past, such as Social Security and the Peace Corps and Medicare, as “risky schemes.” Bush painted Al Gore as unimaginative and unprogressive, a person who only sees “the tunnel at the end of the light.”

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.”<sup>xvii</sup>

The press and pundit response to Bush's acceptance speech was overwhelmingly favorable. David Broder of the *Washington Post* praised it for its “exceptional eloquence” and for producing a Republican Party “enjoying unusual unity.”<sup>xviii</sup> 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.”<sup>xix</sup>

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. And 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.

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The year 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.<sup>xx</sup>

“Conventions remain very relevant and very important,” Nicholson said to anyone who would listen.<sup>xxi</sup>

And, even though the major television networks covered less of the 2000 Republican convention than in the past, the convention proceedings did serve to galvanize the party faithful for the general election campaign ahead. “The conventions are still the places where the politicians of the 50 states gauge each other’s honest expectations,” wrote David Broder of the *Washington Post*. The conventions are where the party politicians “decide whether the investment of time, money and effort they will be asked by the nominee to make over the next three months really has a chance to produce a victory.”

Broder concluded: “For the Republicans who came to Philadelphia, the answer is overwhelmingly yes.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Another trend was becoming apparent at the year 2000 Republican National Convention. 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.

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 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 served up for general audiences, there was always cable’s CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Even more narrowly focused on particular audiences were the 40 dot-coms that made up Internet Alley at the year 2000 Republican convention. Conveniently grouped together on a media pavilion adjacent to the First Union Center, 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 as the first “Internet convention.”

Similar to some of the cable channels, many of the Internet sites sought particular audiences. Women.com obviously was for women. Politicallyblack.com targeted African-Americans. Belief.net was set up for the religious faith community. Policast.com provided convention coverage to those who liked to listen to politics on Internet radio.<sup>xxiv</sup>

So perhaps the time has come 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 take back 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.



Both George W. Bush, and the image of the national conventions, emerged in great shape from the year 2000 Republican convention in Philadelphia.

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