

Election 2004 and Media Spectacle

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The primary season requires that candidates raise tremendous amounts of money to finance travel through key campaign states, organize support groups in the area, and purchase television ads. While the primaries involve numerous debates, media events, and state votes, usually a few definitive images emerge that define the various candidates, such as the negative image of Democratic party candidate and frontrunner Edmund Muskie crying on the New Hampshire state capital steps while responding to a nasty newspaper attack on his wife, or front runner Gary Hart hitting the front pages with a sex scandal, replete with pictures, in the 1984 primaries. Michael Dukakis was arguably done in by images of him riding a tank and looking silly in the 1988 election, as well as being the subject of negative television ads that made him too liberal and soft on crime and defense. Bush senior, however, was probably done in the 1992 election with repeated images of his convention pledge, "Read my lips. No new taxes" after he had raised taxes and doubled the national deficit.

Positive spectacles can also be decisive in both primaries and national election. In 1980, Ronald Reagan's decisive seizing of a microphone in the New Hampshire debates and insistence that since he was paying for the debate, he would decide who would participate produced an oft-repeated images of Reagan as strong leader; in 1984, his zinging of Walter Mondale in presidential debates ("There you go again!") and making light of his age arguably reassured his election, whereas Al Gore's sighs and swinging from aggressive to passive behavior in the presidential debates probably lost support that might have been crucial to his election and not enabled the Bush Gang to steal it (see my 2001 book *Grand Theft 2000* for details).

In the 2004, Democratic primary Howard Dean was first portrayed as the surprise insurgent candidate. An energetic Dean was shown nightly on television and he received positive publicity as front-runner in cover stories in the major national news magazines. Suddenly, however, just before the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries images of an angry Dean began circulating and intemperate remarks, or critical positions taken out of context, made Dean look like a fire-breathing radical. While he received perhaps twice as much media coverage than any other Democratic party candidate in 2003, he received almost totally negative coverage in 2004 and his campaign came to an abrupt halt the night of the Iowa primary. Coming in a distant third, Dean tried to energize his screaming, young supporters and to catch the crowd's attention emitted a loud vocal utterance himself, followed by energetic recitation of the states he would campaign in. Dean's "scream" was perhaps the most-played image of the campaign season and effectively ended his campaign.

Presidential elections always generate a convention spectacle to sell their candidate to a broader public, energize their base, and provide the rituals of democratic inauguration of a would-be president. The Democratic Party convention at Boston in late July 2004 attempted to present a spectacle of diversity and unity, using speakers from a variety of different ethnicities, genders, ages, social groups, and positions, all strongly affirming the candidacy of John Kerry.

During the third night of the convention, the theme switched to national security and “making America stronger,” as a bevy of former military commanders took center stage to criticize Bush administration military and national security policy and to praise the virtues of John Kerry. Leading up to his speech, Kerry staged an event in Boston Harbor where he arrived in a boat with his “band of brothers” who had served with him in Vietnam. The ‘nam vets came onto stage just before Kerry’s speech and he was introduced by Vietnam vet, former Georgia senator Max Cleland, a three-limb amputee who had been the recipient of one of the nastiest campaigns in recent US history as the Bush Gang ran ads associating the highly decent and admirable Cleland with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein in the 2002 Georgia Senate race, claiming that the heroic fighter was “soft” on terrorism, and enabling a mediocre Republican to defeat him (shame on Georgia!).

Cleland rose to the occasion, making a rousing speech about his personal trust in the strength and abilities of John Kerry and making strong arguments that America would be safer and stronger with a Kerry presidency. The usually stiff and often lugubrious Kerry was limbered up for the occasion, beamed genuine smiles, and gave a vigorous, if sometimes too rapid, critique of Bush administration policies and articulations of his own policies on national security and domestic politics.

I generally watched the conventions on C-Span which gave unfiltered presentation of the Democratic convention spectacle, but when I did turn to the big three or cable networks was generally appalled by the negative framing of the speeches and event. In the words of Washington Post media critic Howard Kurtz:

"I was going to talk about Fox News's coverage of Al Gore's speech, but the fair-and-balanced network blew off the former veep's speech in favor of Bill O'Reilly.

O'Reilly interrupted his segment to toss to the Gore address for about 40 seconds, then started to rebut Gore. When Jimmy Carter took the podium, Fox joined it late and got out way early. Instead, viewers were treated to an interview with Republican activist Bill Bennett. While Carter was talking, Sean Hannity told Bennett: "I call this the reinvention convention. One of the things the Democrats want to do is create a false perception of who they are."

How would Fox fans know, since they weren't able to hear Gore (the man who won the popular vote last time) or former president Carter? What happened to "we report, you decide"? While Carter continued, Hannity played the video of Teresa Heinz Kerry telling a reporter to "shove it."

This is the kind of thing that makes critics question whether Fox has a Republican agenda.

I've long argued that people should separate Fox's straight reporters from its opinionated talking heads. And yes, all the cable networks cut away from some mid-level speakers to give more airtime to their own anchors, analysts and guests. If Fox wants to keep its talk-show stars on the air, it's probably better for ratings.

(Brit Hume did rerun four or five minutes of Gore after 10 p.m.).

But virtually pulling the plug on live coverage of Gore and Carter? How about letting them speak and then ripping them, or critiquing them, or whatever. The network is supposed to be covering the convention, not just using it as a backdrop. (see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/nation/columns/kurtzhoward/>)

In his July 29, 2004 Daily Show, comedian John Stewart proclaimed Al Sharpton's speech the most rousing event of the convention and presented several minutes of commentary from Chris Mathews of CNBC, Newsweek commentator Howard Fineman, and others who savaged Sharpton in brutal, almost racist, terms. Stewart pointed out that the cable networks cut Sharpton off so that their pundits could savage him, rather than letting viewers see and judge for themselves. It is hard to see the corporate media pundits as anything but fierce partisans or narcissistic egomaniacs who would rather bluster and jabber and tear down progressive politicians than listen, learn, and offer balanced commentary.

Obviously, the partisan and negative framing of political events and obvious bias of many networks has turned many viewers off and a July 30, 2004, Reuters report indicated that "Bare-Bones DNC Coverage Draws Lower Ratings." The four major TV networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox) limited coverage to one-hour of prime time television viewing declined from 2000. While viewing was up for the three cable news networks' coverage, cumulative

The one hour prime-time limitation meant that viewers of Network television did not get to see former Vice President Al Gore's opening night speech, or many other Democratic Party luminaries including Ted Kennedy, Wesley Clarke, Howard Dean, or Jessie Jackson. Here's a modest suggestion: granted that gavel to gavel convention coverage is only appropriate for C-Span and cable news networks, why couldn't the networks have a late night hour reprise of the highlights of the speeches of the day with limited commentary and discussion? This way viewers could see the highlights of the speeches, or entire speeches if newsworthy, and judge for themselves the saliency of what the party politicians are arguing.

Of course, it is ultimately the responsibility of viewers and citizens to choose their own channels of communication and sources of information, and obviously network television is one of the poorest sources of news and information. Indeed, one of the novelties of the 2004 conventions was the presence of bloggers who presented moment-by-moment, or highly detailed, Internet coverage of the convention. Indeed, those seeking to see speeches neglected by television could often go to websites that collected the speeches, or transcripts of talks also readily found on many Internet sites. US Network television is simply a national disgrace when it comes to covering US politics and a well-informed citizen cannot rely on television to present the news and information needed to be a responsible citizen.

Another problem with corporate television coverage of American Politics is what Paul Krugman calls "The Triumph of the Trivial" (New York Times, July 30, 2004). Krugman points out that study of transcripts of the major cable and broadcast TV networks reveals almost no coverage of John Kerry's plan "to roll back high-income tax cuts and use the money to cover most of the uninsured." Yet there was saturation coverage of Teresa Heinz Kerry's telling a newspaper

reporter to “shove it.” However, there was little attempt to contextualize this event in noting that the newspaper writer in question was a rightwing hatchet-man for Richard Mellon Scaife, who funded the attempts to smear the Clintons, and that the paper in question had repeatedly published personal attacks on Heinz-Kerry’s previous husband Senator John Heinz (R-Penn) and continually attacked her own activities, especially after she married Senator John Kerry.

Krugman also cites the frequent framing of John Edwards and John Kerry as “millionaires,” a label rarely applied to Dick Cheney and George W. Bush, although they not only are multimillionaires but shove through economic policies that benefit the economic elite whereas Kerry and Edward at least claim to represent the interests of the middle class and working people. Also important, Krugman notes, are stories that are not covered at all such as the Florida Republican party call to supporters to send in absentee write-in ballots because the new voting machines lack a paper trail and cannot “verify your vote,” a position that flew in the face of Jeb Bush’s contention that the Florida voting machines were safe and reliable.

Perhaps the most irritating and recurrent scandal of US media coverage of important elections concerns the focus on the horse-race dimension and the saturation coverage of polling. In 2000, the polls were wildly off which showed George W. Bush constantly ahead of Al Gore in the popular vote when Gore received more than a half a million more votes than Bush. Indeed, I would like to see all national polls banned from TV: the key data are figures for states in the Electoral College so national polls tell little about where the race is really going. In summer 2004, for instance, national polls generally showed a dead-heat, and even Bush ahead on occasions, whereas the most in-depth state polls showed Kerry with a healthy lead in the necessary number of states to win the election.