No matter which party, appearance is everything

By David Finkle

It's generally conceded that Republican balloon drops are better than those the Democrats stage. (Someone truly nasty might suggest it has to do with the lopsided distribution of hot air.)

On the other hand, Democrats seem to favor funnier hats. There's that longtime lady delegate who adds something to her Tower-of-Babel chapeau every four years.

No matter which of these convention conventions you're looking at, what it comes down to is style. Stimulating or dull, these outings amount to a constant parade of style.

For one instance, what else could Bill Clinton's Monday night entrance be called but stylish? There he was doing a Hollywood stride down that long and shiny Staples Center corridor. It was already clear the President's baton-passing speech was going to run later than the crucial 11 p.m. dividing line between prime time and late night, but he was determined to spend (waste?) precious seconds walking the walk. And, if my eyes didn't deceive me, do it with a body-lengthening camera lens ogling him.

And what about Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg's appearance? No one of a certain age looking at how she was dressed could fail to think of her mother.

The simple dress, the three-strand necklace were what Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis might have worn on such an occasion. Or perhaps did wear — the necklace may have been one item not auctioned off at Sotheby's. Put another way, it wasn't only Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg's words that linked her speech to the New Frontier.

And what of Al Gore's brown suits? It's an axiom that Harvard men from the Vice President's era may wear brown tweeds, but never brown suits.

Supposedly, it was Karenna Gore Schiff who advised her dad to switch to "natural tones" for his campaign. Of course, what's "natural" within the Beltway is just one-of-the-guys wear in the Midwest.

Since President Clinton long ago smartened up his Arkansas wardrobe, Al Gore's suits are another subtle tactic for distancing him from his eight-year partner.

Which brings us to the real point of this year's White House competition.

Brown suits or no brown suits, Al Gore is not synonymous with style. None of the adjectives regularly plucked to describe him come under the rubric "stylish" — certainly not the ever-popular "stiff" or "wooden."

To the contrary, Al Gore is a man of much substance at a time when the commodity is in eclipse. Furthermore, he's chosen — honorably, many would insist — to emphasize substance as a way to differentiate himself from George W. Bush, whose acceptance speech in Philadelphia was a triumph of style over substance.

What does Bush have to say about himself and his day-to-day shepherding of Texas that is genuinely substantial?

What Gore doesn't have and Bush does — even his detractors concede it to him — is a personal style that includes affability, likability, instant believability.

Put another way, the glad-handing that got Bush elected president of his fraternity — Delta Kappa Epsilon, often thought to be the inspiration for Animal House — could get him elected president of the United States.

So the key trick is getting the style-substance formula right. Were Al Gore able to do it, he might be doing better in the polls.

Sure, the American public wants a dollop of substance with their dose of style, but not so much that they get bored or confused. Candidate Gore doesn't understand this. Indeed, he seems set on denying the reality of it, on bringing the electorate around to his way of seeing things. For good or ill, style just isn't his style.

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Media events

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Today at 12:45 p.m.: Rep. Joseph Hoeffel (D., Montgomery County).
2 p.m.: Inquirer political columnist Larry Eichel.
Tomorrow on the Commentary Page: How the media are dealing with the Democrats.

The right words tonight could make the difference.

For Gore, it's show time

By Douglas Pike

Al Gore's big speech tonight from Los Angeles is a tough challenge. He must smoothly mix pitches to the Democrats' liberal base with ideas aimed at centrists and even conservatives.

Yet even as he toggles across the political spectrum, he must come across as a strong leader who is guided by principle. Polls show he trails George W. Bush on both leadership and likeability — gaps that may be hard to close simultaneously — but that's the challenge.

With his advisers supposedly wrangling over what this all-important speech should include, Gore chose to draft it himself and let his authorship be known. Perhaps this was just a wily way to lower expectations.

Still, he could make tonight his big breakthrough. Here's how:

Start with a surprise that might unsettle Democratic loyalists and anger his boss but could get anti-Clintonites to take a fresh look at him. Instead of barely mentioning the sex-and-perjury scandal that outraged millions of Americans, he could somberly restate his own angry disappointment with the President, not only with the puerile affair but also with the months of lies. Then he'd implore Americans to judge him and Joe Lieberman on their own merits.

He could follow with a counterpunch on ethics. First, he decries the gusher of "soft money" from special interests and pledges that John McCain's ban on it — which Bush opposes — will be the first bill he sends to Congress. Second, he signals an impartial Justice Department by announcing that his choice for attorney general is former Republican Sen. Jack Danforth, who almost made it onto the GOP ticket.

Then it's on to the domestic agenda, taking his share of the credit for past achievements, and explaining how he'd build on them. Bragging about economic growth and budget surpluses, he notes his own tie-breaking vote that passed the anti-deficit package in '93. He warns against blowing it with a huge Republican tax cut but touts tax relief for everyday folks.

He vows to add another buck to the minimum wage, which has overwhelming public support, and reminds the public that Bush has made no such promise. He reminisces about rounding up votes in Congress for the last, 90-cent increase over stubborn GOP opposition.

His other bread-and-butter priority is health care: coverage ASAP for all children, expansion of Medicare to age 55 and older, prescription-drug coverage for all seniors. And on a patients' bill of rights, he quotes Rep. Charlie Norwood (R., Ga.), a dentist, saying that the Republican version "isn't worth the paper it's printed on."

On Social Security, where Bush's partial privatization has been a hit, Gore needs to keep calling it radical and push his very different plan: general revenues to shore up traditional



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benefits and subsidized individual accounts on top of that.

Because Bush threatens to steal the education issue based on his Texas record, in contrast to Democratic coziness with teachers' unions, Gore's rhetoric in favor of hiring 100,000 new, competent teachers won't do. On the campaign trail, he has advocated firing incompetent teachers, which isn't exactly a federal matter, but it sells. He can appeal to parents coast-to-coast by repeating that in blunt terms. Boos from any of the hundreds of delegates who belong to teachers' unions would help him look courageous.

Other strokes for centrists and conservatives: the success of work-oriented welfare reform, the steady decline in crime and a call for a crackdown on corporate welfare.

He must also proudly lay claim to Democratic tenets such as a woman's right to abortion and everybody's right to an unspoiled environment.

As for the big finish, the obvious approach is to circle back to preserving and extending prosperity. Instead, he should close on an issue on which Republicans usually have more public trust: national security. That can showcase Gore as a potential leader. He talks about working side-by-side with the President through the crises in Bosnia, Haiti and Kosovo — and he chafes at Bush's suggestion that U.S. forces have declined.

Finally, he speaks as a Vietnam veteran who wouldn't lightly put troops at peril but wouldn't skirt America's responsibilities either. This invites Americans to compare him as commander-in-chief to a Texas governor with less than six years of public service under his belt.

Douglas Pike, a member of The Inquirer's Editorial Board, was a speech writer for former Sen. Paul Tsongas. His e-mail address is dpike@phillynews.com

Mixed message from L.A. shows the value of a script

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

Joe Andrew, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, was partially right when he claimed that his party's convention would be less scripted than the one the Republicans put on in Philadelphia. By the time the curtain comes down tonight in Los Angeles, he may wish it had been more scripted.

The Hoosier was getting in a dig at the professionalism and showmanship that left little to chance at the GOP conclave. So far, the Democrats have shown themselves equally adept as the GOP in preventing the kind of platform and credentials fights that increase TV ratings but damage party unity.

One day, Democrats may even figure out how to get their principal attractions on stage during prime time. (President Clinton began his talk five minutes shy of the witching hour of 11 p.m. in Philadelphia. Keynoter Rep. Harold Ford Jr. of Tennessee mounted the rostrum a few minutes after 11 Tuesday.)

What the Democrats have mistakenly left unscripted is the message they want to convey to the American people and where they should pitch their appeal. In the first two days of their convention, the Democrats gave diametrically opposed reasons for keeping the presidency.

Clinton's clear, if understated, theme in his self-indulgent valedictory Monday night was that "we never had it so good." He talked about how his administration had erased deficits, balanced budgets, created jobs and taken the country to "new heights of prosperity, progress and peace."

On Tuesday, Jesse Jackson, Ted Kennedy, Bill Bradley and other "old line" Democrats trumpeted the familiar liberal litany of class warfare, income redistribution and an expanded role for the government.

Viewers might have wondered whether they had been watching two different conventions. Clinton took credit for the lowest Hispanic and African American unemployment on record, rising wages and "the lowest child poverty rate in 20 years." Jackson and Bradley called for a new war to eradicate child poverty, which they said was 20 percent.

While the statistics might be reconciled (Democrats of all stripes seek to unify behind a common enemy: the GOP Congress), Democrats obviously cannot decide what strategy offers them the best hope of victory. Do they target "swing voters" (moderates, independents, married women, blue collar men) susceptible to Bush's message of "compassionate conservatism"?

Or should they galvanize their base (minorities, union households, and certain "special interests")?

They have much catching up to do in both quarters. Polls show Gore receiving 78 percent support among Democrats, as opposed to Bush's 95 percent among Republicans. A strong showing by Ralph Nader juxtaposed to a low turnout among Democrats may cede to Bush states rich in electoral votes that are historically Democratic.

Gore's worries about Nader, who is pulling 8 percent in California,

The Democrats have given diametrically opposed reasons for keeping the presidency.

may account for Clinton's one uncharacteristic display of modesty in his breast-pounding speech. He kept silent about his most substantial domestic achievements: NAFTA, the World Trade Organization and normal trade relations with China — issues that most account for the left's estrangement from Gore.

But is upping turnout and support among its base all Democrats need to do to win? Gore's choice of "new Democrat" Joe Lieberman suggests otherwise.

Behind all the talk about his religion and his break with Clinton on matters of morality and campaign finance, guardians of the "old order" fret that the Connecticut senator might actually move the party away from the very orthodoxy that has cost it its majority status. The more he backpedals on vouchers, racial preferences and Social Security privatization, the less he will be able to do for Gore.

One message the Democrats are managing to get across, through the confusion of their convention, is that the party is in trouble.

Alvin S. Felzenberg, a visiting fellow at the Heritage Foundation, specializes in the American presidency.

Jane Eisner *American Rhythms*

Hillary's complicated saga leaves a confusing legacy

As Hillary Rodham Clinton was about to address an arena of fellow Democrats on Monday, former presidential aide David Gergen noted ruefully: "This *should* be a night of a very simple story line ..."

Nothing's simple with this first lady.

She has rewritten the job description, all right, but it's not clear whether that's for better or worse.

She's ignited an anti-Hillary backlash — in the persons of Tipper Gore and Laura Bush — while forcing herself on the New York electorate in the brash hope that it grants her a job.

She's made us marvel at her eleventh-hour rescues of her husband from political ignominy and left us dizzy by her continual reinventions of self. She's Lady MacBeth. Or, depending on the audience, Joan of Arc.

Her legacy will be similarly confused.

When she first burst on the scene (a hundred political years ago, it seems), Hillary Clinton was a homesteader on unsettled land, a leader into fresh, egalitarian territory. She was going to prove that strong, smart, independent women could play a substantive role in American politics and policy-making.

She would wear a pantsuit to Capitol Hill.

And if a slice of the population detested her, well, that was their problem. She was the feminist of the future.

How quaint all of that seems now. Quaint and embarrassing.

For the feminist of the future often resorted to old-fashioned, simpering evasion and manipulation when faced with uncomfortable questions — from the press or the prosecution.

After the health-care debacle, she dropped out of sight without taking real responsibility for her prime role in bumbling that important initiative. Then she lost many more of us in her unconvincing attempt to play the victim during the Monica Lewinsky fiasco.

To her credit, Clinton used her unique platform to speak out for women's rights and welfare around the world. Back at home, though, it was more about this woman's right — to figure out a way to run for the U.S. Senate from a state she barely knew, no matter what sorts of conflicts of interest that might create.

No wonder this first lady makes one yearn for a less complicated story line. Just what Laura Bush and Tipper Gore seem to offer.

But an anti-Hillary backlash should not be interpreted as a feminist backlash. That's misleading. Hillary Clinton is *sui generis*.

Who else has ever been like her? She's donned so many personae as first lady that it's hard to know which one is real. This isn't about superficial zigzags — name changes, hairstyles — but deeper ones.

Americans like to see political leaders who are comfortable in their own skins. That is one key to Bill Clinton's infuriating but enduring charm. It's also evident in George W. Bush's appeal (and in Al Gore's problems).

But Hillary Clinton always seems to be trying on identities to push herself ahead. The aggressive co-president. The traditional, supportive wife. The type not to "stand by her man" — until she did.

She made it impossible to trust her. And that leaves a troubling challenge for the next first lady, whose extraordinary platform for doing good rests on the public's trust in her word and her motives.

Hillary Clinton is now searching for a new role, a Senate seat of her own. Perhaps this is what she needed all along. In her book *Hillary's Choice*, Gail Sheehy tells how Clinton even explored running for governor of Arkansas in 1989 as an independent, when her husband — saddled with another extramarital indiscretion — was unsure about one more campaign.

She may end up representing the people of New York state. That's their choice. Right now our choice is to say, politely but firmly, that Hillary Clinton doesn't offer the only model for first lady. Let's hope her confusing legacy will be of little consequence to her successors.

Jane Eisner's column appears here on Thursdays. Her e-mail address is jeisner@phillynews.com

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