COMMENTARY

Differences defined, the Democrats go forth

Post-convention pondering: Our commentators assess Gore's performance and the party's hopes.



RON EDMONDS / Associated Press

For Gore, a truly grand finale

Al Gore and the Democrats may have retrieved credibility from the jaws of disaster in the final two hours of their convention.

Tipper Gore's multimedia tribute to her husband was tender, touching and substantive. The candidate was at his best — serious, thoughtful, responsible, earnest — showing, in short, all the qualities one should want in a president.

So resounding were the final hours that I'm inclined to skip over most of the many notes of annoyance and vexation I'd been scribbling all week.

One of the best things about Gore's acceptance speech is that it lacked the wince-inducing distortions that had been such an unattractive (if effective) part of Gore's rhetoric back when he was putting Bill Bradley out of his misery in New Hampshire. Still, it's worth noting that in the single sentence Bradley devoted to personal praise of Gore during his convention speech, the word *integrity* was not employed.

The low point of the convention was surely Tuesday's "Old Timers Night." One had the feeling that Ted Kennedy and Jesse Jackson were organizing a march back across the "Bridge to the 21st Century." When Jackson, who suddenly seems more avuncular than militant, listed the great protest issues of past conventions, the list ended in 1984.

Before the end, the highlights were pretty much confined to Joe Lieberman's speech. Much has been made of the idea that the Republican convention had been "scripted," while the Democratic convention was not. More accurately, the Republicans were well scripted, while the Democrats were badly scripted.

The good news is that panel discussions are unlikely to blemish a convention schedule again. The worst in Los Angeles came Thursday as old friends of Gore were spread out on the stage in a faux casual manner looking like a fashion spread for a J.C. Penney catalog.

Nonetheless, the finale was formidable enough to arrest the giddy glee of Republicans who'd begun to think their candidate was sure to win in a walk. George W. Bush may have given the more engaging acceptance speech, but Gore's presentation demonstrated that when the two meet for their debates, it will be a very open question as to who seems more presidential.

— *David Boldt*

Restive base forces a gamble

Al Gore has taken a major gamble. He is betting that most voters feel as bad off or as besieged as he told them they were in his acceptance speech. They'll have to want someone "fighting" for them if the campaign he intends to run is to succeed. That may be a tall order.

For most of American history, voters have rejected the class warfare, "us against them" populist campaigns of the kind Gore is running. The few that succeeded occurred during major economic downturns, not in times of prosperity. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Gore's parents no doubt told him, ran when one third of the nation was "ill-housed, ill-clad and ill-nourished."

In these times of balanced budgets, surpluses, an economic growth rate approaching 4 percent — a time when, for the first time in history, a majority of Americans own stock in some of the very corporations Gore castigates — it's harder to make the case.

He feels he has to try. He may have had little choice.

An unstated theme running through the Democratic convention was that Al Gore's hold on his party is less secure than George W. Bush's command over his.

Bush, as the Democrats repeatedly reminded their audience, shunted his party's divisive spokesmen and special interests to the side in Philadelphia.

Gore had them in full view at Los Angeles. Each extracted a price. Ted Kennedy cast himself as the guard dog standing watch for any attempt to reform or restructure programs central to Democratic orthodoxy. "Progressives" conditioned their support for the ticket on Joe Lieberman's changing his position on affirmative action, vouchers and Social Security.

Having gone into the convention with his base still not secured, Gore leaves with two strikes still against him: Democrats fear that they cannot win and the current occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, with his permanent cloud of scandal, still casts a large shadow on the election.

Dependent on his party's vocal, liberal base, Gore has little time or flexibility to develop a more centrist message. So he is "going for broke."

— *Alvin S. Felzenberg*

Out of Clinton's shadow

Maybe, in cases like this, you just see what you want to see, hear what you want to hear. But what others deemed "rushed," I judged to be urgency. What others claimed was argumentative, I thought registered as authoritative.

What others gauged to be limited in its populist thrust, I responded to as inclusive of more Americans than might be supposed.

Talking here, of course, about Al Gore's acceptance speech, which many have called the best he's ever given. I can't say, since I haven't seen them all. On the contrary: By deliberate plan, I've seen few. For too long it's pained me to watch a man whom I admire look so bad-omelette-queasy whenever he tried to get his message across.

Gore's ability and sincerity I've rarely questioned; his mistakes I've tried to understand as lapses, not expediency. But the jerky gestures and odd speech patterns — reminiscent of a wind-up doll winding down — have indeed been been off-putting.

Forget about how it isn't easy being green. Apparently, it's much harder being Al Gore. And being Al Gore is what those who know him best said he must be if he expected to get the coming campaign off on the right — er, slightly left of center — foot.

Wanting so often to yell "Don't do that" at the vice president is enervating. So I had to steel myself for Thursday night's outing. Well, something happened while I sat ready to go into cringe position. Being Al Gore suddenly didn't seem that difficult, after all.

"I stand here tonight as my own man," he said, and he was. He also said, "If you entrust me with the presidency, I know I won't always be the most exciting politician." Ironically, the admission infused a certain can-do-will-do excitement into his manner.

My theory is that during these last seven years Vice President Gore has felt constrained by Bill Clinton — intimidated, baffled by the easy charisma. He simply has never found for himself the formula by which he could appear deferential to his boss but also detached. The frustration manifested itself in the mechanical man with the misplaced pauses and puppyish manner. Now that the President has finally stepped aside, the real, the confident Al Gore is free to emerge.

— *David Finkle*

A dose of American mythology

The political convention may have outlived its purpose as the place to nominate candidates and thrash out platform ideas. But this quadrennial ritual has come to embody something else: A way to reconnect with our national mythology.

Bear with me on this. Put aside your cynical dismissal of the mawkish videos and hyperbolic speeches for a moment and think about what stories they were meant to convey.

George W. Bush's blood is as blue as it gets in this country, yet he chose to be filmed driving a pickup truck around his dusty ranch with a panting dog on his lap.

Al Gore was raised among the Washington elite, yet he chose to highlight his mother as a struggling waitress, his father as a teacher in a one-room school in the improbably named town of Possum Hollow.

Sure, you say, they're doing that to get elected. But why do they believe it will work? Because Americans still hold true to this mythology, that success is not predicated on birth but on deed, drive, ambition. That to be extremely wealthy is to be out of touch with ordinary life in ways that diminish one's ability to lead.

This myth was transmitted this month by modern technology, but it's as old as the republic. It was pioneered by that great inventor, Benjamin Franklin, who skillfully reworked the details of his life to launch the American hero as self-made man.

Family is also central to the myth. Think of what was extolled in Philadelphia and Los Angeles: Family life. Al Gore in a Halloween costume. George Bush as Little League coach. Joe Lieberman and his mother.

Intellectually, we know that there have been presidents of significance with less than story-book private lives. John Kennedy was hardly monogamous. Ronald Reagan barely spoke to his children. Bill Clinton needs no further elaboration.

Still, we shower our public figures with expectation because of a rooted belief that traditional family life is the organizing principle of American society. We cling to the notion that a good president must be a good parent, Despite historical evidence to the contrary. Knowing that Bush read to his girls and Gore helped with the dinosaur diorama, knowing that they both seem to love their wives — all this nourishes our need to believe that family life can withstand the assaults of modern individualistic culture.

Seen this way, conventions are more than political pep rallies and cocktail parties for wealthy donors. They are a window into our national psyche, a parade of aspirations, a reminder of what stories we treasure.

Shame on the networks for not covering them more completely. Shame on citizens who didn't pay attention. There are precious few rituals left that define and validate our national mythology. How does a nation survive without its stories?

— *Jane Eisner*

A classic clash of ideologies

There can be no missing it now: This year's contest between Vice President Gore and Gov. George W. Bush is about fundamental differences over social equity, taxes and government's role in our national life. All the blurring of differences, all the talk of centrism will not — and certainly ought not — obscure the importance of the choice.

In his acceptance speech, Gore did three things required to put him back into the contest. He briskly defined his stance toward President Clinton. He offered a redefinition of the personality issue. And he outlined what he would stand for — and against.

Gore challenged Bush to a different personality contest: which candidate could be counted on to "fight for people." It is no accident that Gore here linked his fate to his father's record. Albert Gore Sr. was a liberal Democrat who believed that government could temper the injustices of the economic marketplace and protect individuals from the abuses of private power.

Gore, the son, proposes to update that old Democratic commitment. And his repeated invocation of traditional social values on matters of family life and popular entertainment was clearly aimed at blue-collar and lower middle-class voters once known as Reagan Democrats. Their cultural conservatism is harnessed to a view of government as a potential ally in the struggle for economic security.

This is an important election because Gore and Bush will be forcing Americans to decide which "Big" most worries them: Big Government or Big Private Interests. It is a classic argument in American history, joined generation after generation. It is a battle over whether government is seen as a barrier to the efficient workings of the market, or as a useful guardian of interests and values the market cannot represent.

It is exactly the kind of argument democratic elections are supposed to settle. This election matters because it could settle the question for a generation.

— *E.J. Dionne*

High marks for Gore and the Liebermans

By Gerald Kolpan

Once again, it's time for the wild, woolly and wacky world of rating the television performances presented by at this week's Democratic National Convention. On Thursday, I critiqued Monday and Tuesday, so here's the report card for Wednesday and Thursday. Please remember that these are critiques only of TV appearance and technique. I'll leave criticism of content to other blowhards:

John Lewis. The legendary civil-rights leader and politician was certainly breathing fire. Unfortunately, political flames can often get in the way of intelligibility. Lewis preaches like nobody's business, but it doesn't help his party or his candidate much if you can't understand what he says. **B.**

Hadassah Lieberman. With her hand to her throat and near tears with pride, Mrs. Joseph Lieberman didn't mind letting the world know that she was understandably *verklempt*. Mrs. Lieberman — and Mrs. George W. Bush, for that matter — are first-rate examples of what I like to call the "Anti-Elizabeth": Political wives totally without the eerie Stepford quality that makes many voters recoil from Bob Dole's spouse.

Hadassah was great, seeming sincerely thrilled for her "Joey." While not a practiced speaker, she got her points across with grace and class. Better political spouse *kvelling* I have not seen. **A.**

Joe Lieberman. The senator from Connecticut may be something totally new at an American convention: The nation's first Jewish cracker-barrel politician.

With his abundantly folksy speaking style, Lieberman comes off like Will Rogers with a yarmulke in his back pocket. I really got the impression that he "never met a man he didn't like." This demeanor came in handy when he mentioned the patriotism and likability of his opponents — right before skewering them with some countrified humor. This aw-shucks persona may well make the majority of Americans comfortable with Ol' Joe, even if they are more accustomed to the Bella Abzugs of the world. And the line about Tom Hanks and Philadelphia was the best of the campaign so far. **A.**

Tipper Gore. Because the Democrats, unlike the Republicans, couldn't keep their times straight, I tuned in promptly at 10 and missed Tipper. It's *their* fault and not mine.

Al Gore. The vice president has always reminded me of Superman. Not in his abilities but in his physical appearance. Strong-jawed, muscular, dark-haired and broad-shouldered, Gore could easily pass for a somewhat older version of The Man of Steel. Up to now however, big Al has come cross mainly as Clark Kent: mild-mannered politician for a metropolitan political party.

Thursday night, Al Gore at last revealed the big red "S" beneath the starched white shirt. At first, I didn't think he was going to pull the speech off. As he began, he rushed his words and didn't even seem to be aware of the crowd going wild over every word he said. But as the vice president continued, he warmed to his subject matter and slowly built his speech toward the points he most wanted to make.

And although it's hard to describe these flourishes without videotape (I am a television reporter, after all), it seems that Gore may have spent a few hours studying films of Ronald Reagan: The slight flailing of arms, the modest bowing of the head, the look of chastened surprise when the audience roared its approval all seemed torn from the instruction manual written by The Great Communicator.

Through it all, Gore maintained a serious demeanor, staying true to his personality (which is either a plus or a minus in television, depending how much of a jerk you are). It all worked this time. Now it remains to be seen whether this Superman will keep it up and leap George W. Bush in a single bound or revert to his worse-case persona, that of the X-Men's frozen Popsicle of a superhero: the Iceman. **A.**

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