

# The Convention Blues

Covering a political convention is kind of like watching a porn film; you know what's going to happen by its very definition. My coverage of the Democratic Convention in Boston brought tears to the eyes of some television critics who loudly wailed that I was an irresponsible cad for not broadcasting the prime-time speeches on my program. This, of course, is nonsense. Why would I waste time on partisan presentations? My job is to analyze what is going on, not let politicians bloviate unchecked.

The speeches, of course, are broadcast on other TV outlets, as they should be. If you want 'em, you should get 'em. But remember this: Anybody can say anything. Most words are hollow. In politics, sports and dirty movies, it is actions that count. And one more thing, the most dishonest individual on earth can *sound* honest, if given the right script.

So what about the Republican Convention in New York? Once again, I will not broadcast the partisan speeches, because they are agenda-driven. Of course, I'll read the speeches and watch them, if I'm not on the air. Then I'll give you my opinion on what's genuine and what's spin.

Too many Americans are not skeptical enough about what is said to them. Fast-talking con people can hurt you badly. These politicians have a battery of writers parsing every word they say, and their pre-speech rehearsals tend to drain the blood out of their presentations. These people don't talk from the heart, they talk from a script that is designed to rally the faithful, not put forth solutions to problems. So why should we listen?

Curiosity is the primary reason. The only thing really on the line during those speeches is how the politician will perform. And if you can't deliver a pre-packaged speech laid out in

front of you on a giant teleprompter after days of rehearsal, well, you may lose a few votes.

The contrived convention display on the part of both political parties isn't offensive to me, it's just meaningless. What is offensive is the debate structure. This year, the Presidential candidates will meet three times, the Vice Presidential guys once. But the format has a tragic flaw. The debate moderator can't interrupt the candidates. So if a guy decides to dodge the question or deliver a false fact or dance around an issue, there's really nothing the moderator can do. And if the questioners point out any spin, deception or obfuscation, they will likely be criticized as being a boorish or partisan.

The candidates, of course, know all this. They also know the likely line of the debate questioning, so once again they can rehearse with their professional "handlers." Whatever happened to just answering a question honestly? Where is Harry Truman when we need him?

So here's a bulletin about the Republican Convention and the upcoming debates: Help is not on the way. Hope is not on the way. Nothing is on the way, except how well the candidates can put across their preprogrammed points.

Obviously, this is not the way it should be. The nation deserves rigorous debate and tough, incisive questioning of the candidates. Our lives could be at stake in this election, and the stage play that has become the election process is certainly not making us any safer.

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# With Liberty and Slander for All

With just about ten weeks until the Presidential vote, smear merchants on both sides continue to run wild. The internet is one big Defamation.com; John Kerry is a traitor, George W. Bush is a deserter. And there's big money behind the purveyors of this vile brew.

But this is nothing new for America. What's changed is the machinery that delivers the slander. All throughout our history character assassins have surfaced every four years to attack anyone daring enough to run for the highest office in the land. The freedom of screech extends all the way back to 1796.

In that election, campaign supporters of John Adams really went after his opponent Thomas Jefferson, calling him, among other things, an atheist, anarchist, demagogue, coward, trickster and a mountebank.

A mountebank is a guy who sells phony medicine, in case you're like me and didn't know.

Jefferson's crowd immediately struck back by labeling Adams: egotistical, erratic, eccentric and jealous-natured.

Historian Paul Boller describes all this in his lively book "Campaigns" (Oxford Press). Boller chronicles each Presidential contest, and it's clear that we have learned little over the years. The mud stays eerily similar throughout the ages.

In 1828, for example, backers of John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson were totally out of control. Jackson won the vote despite being accused of adultery, gambling, cock fighting, bigamy, slave trading, drunkenness, theft, lying, and murder.

I guess the voters figured anyone with that much energy deserved the top job.

But Jackson's people didn't silently stand by. No way. They hammered Adams hard, accusing him of having premarital relations with his wife and traveling on a Sunday. It doesn't get lower than that.

The slime machine behind James Polk went to work in 1844, announcing that his opponent, Henry Clay, had systemically violated every one of The Ten Commandments.

Clay's mudslingers immediately replied calling Polk "unimaginative." Polk won the election carrying much of the non-creative vote.

U.S. Grant was, perhaps, the most vilified Presidential candidate in history. Running against Horace Greeley in 1872, Grant was called a crook, an ignoramus, a drunk, a swindler, and an "utterly depraved horse jockey."

It's entirely possible that last attack caused much sympathy for Grant who carried 31 of 37 states. A depraved horse jockey indeed!

In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt was actually shot in the chest while campaigning in Milwaukee. He got up, finished his speech, and then went to the hospital. Woodrow Wilson won the election, but let's give the Rough Rider some credit here.

During the campaign of 1928, hysteria reigned because Al Smith was a Roman Catholic. Some supporters of his opponent Herbert Hoover got this message out: If elected, Smith would annul all Protestant marriages and extend the newly completed Holland Tunnel in New York City all the way to Rome! Talk about a big dig.

Compared to the above, calling Bill Clinton a "pot smoking, draft dodger," or labeling John Kerry a "flip-flopper" doesn't

even rate. President Bush's intelligence is being challenged but nowhere have I seen him accused of fathering an out-of-wedlock child as was Grover Cleveland (who actually did). So while we have been assaulted by Swift Boats and taunted by the likes of Michael Moore, the slime peddlers are not nearly as creative as they used to be.

I just pray Bush and Kerry don't travel on Sunday.

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## The Swift Boat Blues

The partisans are running wild over this Swift Boat business, talk radio is crazy with it and the smell of blood is in the air. John Kerry has made a major deal of his Vietnam War record and now his opponents have opened fire on the Senator's experiences. It's all tawdry and distasteful of course, but let's examine things unemotionally.

First off, I believe Jim Rassmann when he says that Kerry saved his life by pulling him out of a Vietnam river while under fire. Rassmann is a former Green Beret, a former police officer and a long time registered Republican until earlier this year. If he says John Kerry is a hero, nobody should doubt it. Rassmann has earned the right to be trusted and insulting his testimony is way out of line.

But I also believe Steve Gardner, a former Navy gunner who was also present on one of Kerry's Swift Boats. He says the Senator wrote up a false report, neglecting to inform the Navy that he, Gardner, had accidentally shot a Vietnamese child during a firefight. This is a tough one. Gardner is implicating himself and has no reason to do so. But perhaps Kerry was looking out for him by not reporting the incident. Only Kerry knows.

It is very possible to perform heroically on some occasions and do less than admirable things on others. All human beings are flawed and we are capable of both valor and deceit. That's what I think happened here. John Kerry was brave, but was also calculating. His heroism impressed most of his Swift Boat mates, but his civilian anti-war activities and perceived grandstanding also alienated many other Vietnam Vets. And so the battle lines are drawn.

What should we, on the sidelines, make of all this? Well, it's a judgment call. It is absolutely wrong for Americans to condemn Kerry's war record because he demonstrated provable valor. However, those who distrust him do deserve to be heard although facts not emotion should be demanded.

I think the Swift Boat political advertisement calling Kerry a charlatan is in poor taste, and if this kind of thing continues it might well backfire on the Kerry haters. Most Americans are fair minded, and bitter personal attacks do not go down well with folks who are not driven by partisanship. Remember, General Wesley Clark was knocked out of the Presidential sweepstakes when he would not disown Michael Moore's insane remark that President Bush was a "deserter." Mr. Bush received an honorable discharge from the National Guard. Admiral Elmo Zumwalt pinned a medal on John Kerry's chest. The record is the record, unless rock solid proof refutes it.

The lesson here is that blind partisanship is not an attribute. No person or candidate is all good or all bad. In America today, with both sides peddling lies and defamation and spin, it is alarmingly difficult just to get simple facts on which to base a responsible vote.

Somewhere Jack Webb is weeping.

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# Up In Smoke

Star Miami Dolphin running back Ricky Williams has walked away from millions of dollars, in part because of marijuana. Williams told the Miami Herald that he smoked weed constantly and masked his use by consuming a substance called "Extra Clean." Nevertheless, Williams failed three drug tests administered by the NFL, and finally decided to retire at age 27, citing his desire to continue smoking pot as one of the reasons.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, less than 2 percent of American youths had ever used marijuana, back in the year 1962. Forty years later, that percentage had increased to an astounding 54%. The simple question is: What dynamic has changed in America to account for the drastic increase in the consumption of marijuana?

The watershed event, of course, was the rise of the anti-war movement in the late 1960s. Smoking pot became the appetizer for the Vietnam protest entree. The rock world immediately got involved, and an intoxication celebration was underway.

Since that time, marijuana use, especially among young people, has steadily increased, and now about 20% of high school seniors smoke pot on a regular basis.

Interestingly, up until 1992, marijuana use was far more common among whites than minority Americans, according to a study by the National Institutes of Health. But in the nineties, pot consumption by African-American men and women between the ages of 18 and 29 increased 224%!

The ten years between 1992 and 2002 coincided with the rise of the rap industry. Icons such as Snoop Dogg and Ludacris

consistently glorified marijuana, and I believe their message fell on willing ears. A generation of American kids, of all colors, were (and continue to be) pounded by rhythms and lyrics encouraging a libertine lifestyle with a heavy emphasis on drug use and exploitative sex. How could this not take a toll?

Anyway, Ricky Williams and millions of other young Americans love their pot, and are willing to make great sacrifices to consume it. Think about all the good Williams could have done with the money he was earning. Life in the National Football League is no easy venture, but athletic ability is a gift that should not be discarded lightly.

The bigger picture is that marijuana use is now largely accepted by American society even in the case of young people. This is a disaster for kids. Awash in drugs and alcohol, we are now a culture where children are exposed to intoxicating agents practically from the time they reach the age of reason (7 years). And any child who becomes involved with mind altering substances loses their childhood instantly. They are never the same.

But how often do you hear the media speak out against substance consumption? It is winked at, excused, and even tacitly encouraged by many pundits and activists. That is the great change since 1962. Getting high is no longer even an issue in many quarters – it is standard procedure.

Ricky Williams should be the poster boy for the marijuana debate. The man obviously is seeking emotional comfort, and the price of that comfort is somewhere around \$15 million dollars. You can't get much higher than that.

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# Moore Sense Please

(Boston) Well, I finally tracked down Michael Moore. I saw him walking in the street outside the Democratic Convention Center and pounced on him like the paparazzi on J-Lo. Moore had been dodging me because his movie was becoming increasingly indefensible by something called "facts." But, to his credit, Moore took up my street challenge and agreed to appear on "The Factor".

We debated for ten minutes and Moore put forth the following:

- That President Bush "lied" about Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction even though the 9/11 Commission, the Senate Intelligence Committee Investigation and Lord Butler's British Investigation all say Bush did not lie.
- Moore defines a "lie" as anything that turns out not to be true. By following this logic, weather forecasters everywhere must now be categorized as pathologically dishonest.
- Moore said he would not have attacked the Taliban government in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attack. Instead, he would have captured Bin laden by using "commandos." Apparently, Moore believes the Taliban would have allowed his "commandos" to root out Osama and his boys with impunity. Moore related the "commando" strategy to me with a straight face.
- Moore denied that Ronald Reagan's arms build up had anything to do with the collapse of the Soviet Union and freedom for Eastern Europe.
- The filmmaker then went on to say that pre-emptive war is wrong and would have been immoral even in the case of Adolf Hitler. Moore said he would have prevented Hitler from assuming power in the first place. I didn't have time ask him how he would have done that but I assume commandos would have been involved.

So, hey, Michael Moore this bud's for you. Thanks for showing up and debating. Now we know the under-pinnings of your world outlook.

What is still astounding to me is how many people continue to embrace the fantasies and deceptions of Michael Moore. Some people actually applauded him at the Democratic Convention, but the heavyweights stayed away.

In one bizarre scene, Moore was seated next to Rosalyn and Jimmy Carter. The couple stared straight ahead, looking like contestants about to eat bugs on the "Fear Factor," and the Kerry campaign has made it quite clear that Moore and other left-wing bomb throwers are not to be seen around the candidate.

In fact, the Kerry people actually censored some of the speechmakers from using inflammatory anti-Bush rhetoric. That is almost unheard of at a political convention.

But old reliable Howard Dean came through. He continues to be Michael Moore's best pal, appearing with him at a Bush bash in a Cambridge hotel. It is absolutely frightening how close Governor Dean came to being the Democratic presidential nominee.

This may surprise you, but I do not dislike Michael Moore. He is a true believer. He wants a completely different kind of country, and he'll do anything to make that happen.

The problem with Moore is that the ends justify the means. He knows his statements and movies are not based on facts, but he continues to say they are. Even in Moore's world where truth doesn't exist, there should be some kind of ethical standard, but there isn't. And the fact that Howard Dean and other powerful Americans accept that situation is more troubling than anything Michael Moore could ever say.