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The Democrats in Denver looked good from the floor, and you can't fake that Stadium politics is now the new normal—fill one or you're a failure.



By Allan Bonner

DENVER, Col.—You can fake a lot of things in politics. You can hand out signs at a convention, but you can't make people wave them for long. You can build applause lines into a speech, but you can't make people clap more than a dozen times. You can't make most people cry. You can't make the people in the cheap seats do much of anything.

The Democrats in Denver looked good from the floor, the media filing rooms, the TV risers, right beside the podium, in the cheap seats and in a private box. You can't fake that.

The Democrats looked good because they did what had to be done. There comes a time at a convention or in a campaign when you have to get a certain job done. Success depends on it and second best won't do.

That was a challenge for all of the major speakers at the 2008 Democratic Convention, and the party itself had a Herculean job to do. First, the Democrats had to shed their perceived weakness on national security and squishiness on domestic crime. They pretty much did that by making foreign relations expert Joe Biden the vice presidential candidate.

They also had to show they are not captive to special interest groups—unions and ethnic voters. Bill Clinton pretty much got that job done in his campaigns in the 1990s by putting more cops on the street, distancing himself from Jesse Jackson, and criticizing rapper Sister Souljah for her violent and hateful lyrics.

At this convention, speakers acknowledged the role of skilled labour in America and even their role in renovating the Pepsi Center for the event. Speakers showed pride in there being more female than male delegates, and referenced gay rights. But the party just seemed inclusive, not captive, to these sentiments and groups.

The party had to pay tribute to Ted Kennedy, since this will surely be his last convention. The moving tribute and introduction by his niece, JFK's daughter, Caroline, was fitting. Senator Kennedy was thought not able or available to speak, but did. His references to his brother and the moon shot must have seemed like ancient history to anyone

under 50 years of age, but his vigorous commitment to health care reminded delegates that there is a high purpose in politics.

Michelle Obama had to position herself as just plain folk. This is a silly political dance in the U.S., since spouses have little or no constitutional/legal status, and ghettoizing them (mainly women) as cookie-bakers is demeaning. But, if the electorate votes for her husband, they're also voting to have Michelle on their living room TVs each week for the next four or eight years. Her personal story did the trick.

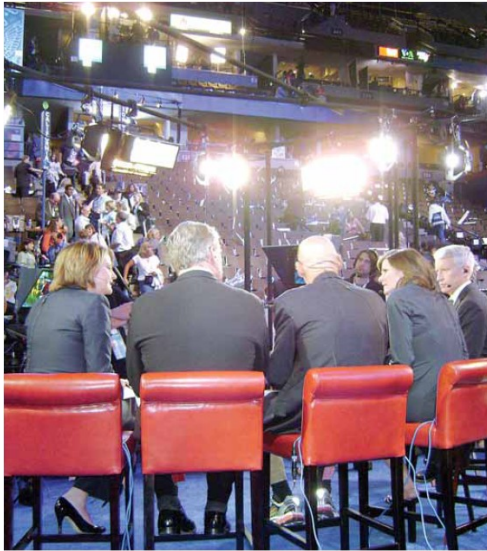
After a tough campaign and a slow-motion withdrawal, Hillary had to demonstrate unequivocal support for her leader. She did it. Like Ted Kennedy in 1976, she also made a speech so natural and convincing that some are saying that if she had demonstrated that skill in the campaign, she'd be the nominee.

Then Hillary added an unexpected classy touch during the alphabetical state roll call. A series of states passed or yielded to give the New York delegation the floor. Rumour was that California couldn't muster its delegates or alternates who were back in Sacramento hammering out a budget. Another rumour was that with 20 per cent of the super delegates, there might be a majority vote for Hillary, thus embarrassing Obama, or vice versa. Rumour was that delegations, especially of Obama's home-state Illinois, were jockeying for whichever votes would put Obama over the top. Another possibility was that Hillary was jockeying to get her total up before Obama won.

Hillary appeared on the floor with her New York colleagues. A sea of TV lights surrounded her. After 10 minutes of unexpected excitement, Hillary took the microphone on behalf of her delegation and moved that the roll call stop and that Obama be nominated by acclamation. The crowd roared relief and approval.

That night, Bill had to rehabilitate his position in the party too. After demeaning Black support for Jesse Jackson and equating Obama's winning and inclusive campaign to Jackson's narrower and losing effort, Bill had some serious repairs to do. He did it.

Without any warm up, backdrop, lead in or set up, Bill simply said he was there to support Obama. Within the next 20 seconds he said he was also



Clinton hunkers down, shows support for Obama: CNN's Anderson Cooper, far right, was at the convention with a groups of panelists. 'Obamamania' was felt on the ground in Denver, Col., last Thursday night. — Picture by Allan Bonner

there to warm up the crowd for Joe Biden. In those couple of dozen opening words, Bill showed the unequivocal support he need to. He used humour to diffuse the tension between the Clinton and Obama camps. And he also alluded to the fact that he now knew his place in the party: warm up act and elder statesman.

Making up for earlier waffling on whether Obama was qualified to be president, Bill pointed out that Obama is, and did so several times for emphasis. He also had one of the great lines of the convention, saying the world is more motivated by the power of America's example

than by an example of America's power. Reviving a theme from his '90s campaigns, he mocked Republican "family values" by citing what a poor economy and multiple tours in Iraq do to families.

Vice-presidential nominee Joe Biden did what he had to do too. The convention speech and the debate are the only sure moments in the sun for the vice president in the American system. As much a fixture as Biden is, he was still introducing himself to the 30 per cent of Americans who don't really know him. He introduced his compelling and emotional personal story and had Michelle Obama in tears. He revealed himself as a great and partisan campaigner. Saying he really liked his friend John McCain, he then pointed out McCain's inconsistencies and the profound differences between parties. This had the troops ready for action.

The toughest thing in politics is filling the hall. You can bring out the faithful, friends and call around. But filling a 75,000-seat arena and having the fire marshal say there are too many on the field, cannot be faked. Stadium politics is now the new normal—fill one or you're a failure.

Of course, there is more work ahead for the Democrats. Obama was a little more specific, more partisan and a little more polished in his delivery. He needs to ramp up the first two in order to win in November.

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