

## The Message from New York

**September 2.** The preliminaries are over. We now await only the acceptance speech from President Bush. Already we know a great deal from the Republican National Convention. While it might make more sense to write this commentary after the President speaks tonight, I am not doing that for two reasons. First, a lesson. That would put me right up against a deadline; I do not think a professor or an author should encourage students to wait until the last minute to finish an assignment! So, I am writing in advance of my Friday morning deadline, as I always do.

The second reason is more serious. I think we all know what President Bush is going to say. He is going to focus on the good parts of his first four years and give some highlights of the ways in which he wants to lead the nation in the next four years. That is what incumbent presidents running for re-election do. That is what they must do. An interesting exercise would be to go back and read speeches given by Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, when they all accepted renomination for a second term. Themes are consistent, whether the first four year record merited it or not.

What have we learned from the first three nights of the Republican National Convention? I think the most interesting "new" outcome of these three nights has been that the Fox Cable News has drawn more viewers than the three major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—for what I believe is the first time ever. To me that says something about the audience. Fox is viewed—correctly in my view, but others may disagree—as the most conservative news source on the air. Viewer profiles show that the Fox audience favors the Republican party and conservative ideas more than do the audiences at the other networks. Apparently, that is who is watching the convention. To be sure, the audiences on the other networks combined outnumber that on Fox; but their viewerships are not so easily defined in partisan terms. I think we can conclude that to some extent the Republicans—and probably the Democrats in Boston—are preaching to the choir. In a way that is not surprising, but it is somewhat disappointing. I hope you as students have watched both conventions, to see the contrast, no matter what your personal political views.

Given that conclusion, the message from the convention has been interesting. Despite the fact that the Republicans spotlighted some of the more moderate public officials in the first nights of their gathering—former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California, Senator John McCain—the message has been a consistent attack on the Democratic nominee, Senator Kerry, as unfit to lead the nation in a difficult time. In fact, of the major speakers so far, only Senator McCain and First Lady Laura Bush have not attacked Senator Kerry in their remarks. Mayor Giuliani's speech was hard-hitting and extremely partisan, much more so than most predicted. Governor Schwarzenegger did not back down from divisive partisan rhetoric, referring to those who need government assistance as "girlie men," a phrase that his opponents in California have jumped on, but which does not seem to upset his supporters.

The Wednesday night speeches took this theme to an extreme. In his keynote address, Senator Zell Miller, the retiring Democratic senator from Georgia who, interestingly, also gave the keynote address to the Democratic National Convention when President Clinton was nominated from the very same Madison Square Garden venue in 1992, came on with a blistering attack on Senator Kerry, in a speech that has been referred to in the press as "venomous" and "full of hate." It was a speech

reminiscent of an earlier era in politics, when politicians were speaking to smaller groups of their own supporters without a national television audience. The speech was enthusiastically received in the hall.

Vice President Cheney's remarks, in accepting his own renomination, were more measured in tone, but no less forceful in message, attacking his opponent as unfit to serve as commander-in-chief. The Vice President—like virtually every speaker to whom I listened—stressed the ability of the President to lead the nation, with toughness and resolve, in the war on terrorism. Very little was said about domestic policies over the past four years or those proposed for the next four.

The goal for the Republican party at their convention was to recoup some of the (quite small) loss they had sustained during the Democratic convention and to enter the fall phase of the campaign ahead of Senator Kerry. By the time you read this, you will know if they succeeded or not; I suspect that they will.

Their goal was also to attempt to set the agenda for those last months of campaigning. It is clear the agenda they have in mind is that this campaign should be about whether or not Senator Kerry can lead the nation in a dangerous world as well as the President can. If they succeed in setting this agenda, they will have pulled off a masterful stroke because, as I have said before, re-election campaigns are normally about the record of the incumbent, not that of the challenger. Republicans criticized the Democratic convention because the theme was to focus on Senator Kerry's war record and hardly to mention his Senate career. Democrats will criticize the Republicans because the theme has been to focus on Senator Kerry and not the domestic and economic policies of the last four years.

Each party was speaking primarily to its own followers. I have seen little over the last three nights that was intended to appeal to the wavering undecideds. I am not certain if that was strategically wise or not; we will find out in the coming weeks and months. But given the audience on television, one could surely argue that the GOP strategists knew to whom they were speaking and successfully energized their own troops. That, after all, is one of the main goals of a convention.