

# LXXX – When Will They Figure It Out?

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By Butler Shaffer

Presidential campaigns in the 1950's did not include make-believe debates between establishment-anointed puppets. Instead, Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson gave speeches (to different groups) that were carried live on television. A news report, at the time, told of a mental hospital where such televised speeches were shown to the patients. The talks got the patients so upset that the hospital had to turn off the television sets. This should have provided an early warning to the ruling elite!

I must admit that I have watched very little of the Democratic National Convention. Like earlier asylum inmates, there is only so much of this sanitized madness that I can take before donning my Napoleon attire. As a consequence, I rely primarily on Internet reports, along with television news and newspaper accounts, to provide what are gratuitously called the "high spots" of the convention.

The other evening, some of the usual suspects of political commentating clumped together on one cable channel to lament the continuing decline in voting among the multitudes, whose continuing participation in this charade is necessary to keep the racket afloat. The assembled babblers — perhaps hoping that great insight might be distilled from the pooling of their ignorance — went down the usual laundry list of explanations for the increasing disinterest in voting. Apathy, registration difficulties, too many competing interests, etc., came in for discussion.

Like those who refuse to acknowledge a naked man at a party, nobody was willing to take note of the fact that millions of Americans have become painfully aware of the utter meaninglessness of political activism and voting to their lives. We have long had a one-party system in America — the Establishment Party — with indistinguishable candidates from indistinguishable branches of this party offered as "choices" to voters. The 2004 elections make this abundantly clear. At a time when cloning has become a "bioethical" issue, we have George Bush and John Kerry as clones of the Establishment Party: each favors the war in Iraq, and Kerry has announced his desire to expand it; each favors the Patriot Act and its attendant police state; each favors a more intensive raid on taxpayers' incomes to support social programs they favor. Voters are expected to become delirious over this choice? The sacker at our neighborhood supermarket offers me a far more significant choice when he asks "plastic or paper?"

Even asylum inmates can appreciate distinctions between sane and insane behavior: they just don't always know which position to take. As Abraham Maslow observed, this is why brain-injured persons try "to maintain their equilibrium by avoiding everything unfamiliar

and strange and by ordering their restricted world in such a neat, disciplined, orderly fashion that everything in the world can be counted upon." To have to listen to the mad babblings of fellow inmates and then hear more lunacies on television, blurs the distinctions between sanity and insanity upon which a return to rationality rests.

Fearful that an outbreak of ideas, or even substantial questions, might infect the convention delegates — and, perhaps, the American public — the Establishment Party saw to it that political protests be confined to concentration camp "free speech zones" constructed at great distance from the convention center. Instead of confronting thoughtful men and women who opposed the war and the present police state, the delegates listened to a speech from a twelve-year old girl who gave the kind of talk one would expect from a twelve-year old. While she lacked the rhetorical style of professional politicians — which, in itself, was a relief — the substance of her presentation fit in perfectly with the rest of the offerings.

This convention — like the rest of modern politics — seemed driven by fear; the fear that something controversial might be uttered, or that the carefully laid plans of the control-freaks in the party might be upset by an outburst of spontaneity (perhaps like the Nebraska delegate at the 1956 GOP convention who tried to nominate "Joe Smith" for vice-president). Even the NASA photo of John Kerry — in which he resembled an Oompa-Loompa (ask your kids if you don't know the reference) — seemed to upset the Kerry crowd almost as much as the prospect of an issue getting onto the floor.

When I did turn to the coverage of this convention, I had the feeling that I was watching a combination rock music awards/evangelical tent revival meeting. Even members of punk rock groups were on hand to encourage their fans to vote. It figures. And there was an abundance of Hollywood celebrities, whose presence became the substance for some giggly television reporters. Not to allow the Republicans a monopoly on non sequiturs, one pro-war onlooker — having exhausted the list of official lies used to gather support for the war — offered the justification that Saddam Hussein had mistreated women, an accusation that made me wonder if, perhaps, the United States should have declared war on the Kennedys!

This sterile convention came down to being its own reason for being. I was reminded of a song from one of the best anti-war movies ever produced, Richard Attenborough's *Oh! What a Lovely War*. As American soldiers were unloading from troop ships en route to their ritualistic slaughter in World War I, they sang "We're Here Because We're Here." Such was the only apparent purpose in this Boston gathering of those who have not fully dissipated either their gullibility or their faith in ours. If a consensus of opinion amongst the conventioners could be identified, it might come down to nothing more than this: "vote for Kerry instead of Bush, because Kerry is u2018good' and Bush is u2018evil.'" Where have we heard this refrain before?

There was a time when political conventions and campaigns could be counted upon to evoke a snippet of intellectual interest — at least enough to keep intelligent souls energized about the process. The last major presidential campaign with an ideological base to it was probably the Goldwater candidacy in 1964. His words — written by my late friend Karl Hess — "extremism in defense of liberty is no vice; and moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue," had substance to them. In contrast, the words — as well as the level of thought behind them — that will be most remembered from the 2004 Democratic convention will probably be Teresa Heinz Kerry's "shove it!"

Politics is even more of a carnival today than when H.L. Mencken so labeled it decades ago. There is greater importance attached to getting the right mix of politically-correct group representations — even of children — than for a presentation of substantive issues. The obligatory whine of "inequality" — a divisive concept that is essential to the health of the Democratic Party — helped divert attention from issues that might have upset the party's insistence upon lockstep thinking. Meanwhile, at a location far removed from the convention center, the few voices of protest extant in Boston were penned up in cages! At the same time, a woman inside the convention center was forcibly removed by Boston police for unfurling a banner reading "End the Occupation of Iraq," a message not approved by Democratic Party officials determined to maintain the bipartisan nature of modern politics.

Even the Democratic governor of Pennsylvania — asked by a reporter why the Iraq war was being played down at the convention — responded with an answer that would have sent the aforementioned asylum inmates into bedlam. The key issue that concerned most Americans, he opined, was the need for alternative energy sources! Is this man trying to outdo George Bush for mendacity, or has he been ensconced for so long in so many "special interest" smoke-filled rooms that he truly believes this kind of nonsense? Does he imagine parents of young children wringing their hands not over a proposed return to conscription — as both wings of the Establishment Party seem bent on bringing about — but over the question of solar panels and affordable fuel cells?

The political establishment depends upon the continuing participation of men and women who believe in the preposterous; provided it has been certified by the kind of political conventions and media coverage to which we are subject. What sends members of the establishment into a state of delirium is the question: what if they gave an election and nobody showed up? What if men and women understood — as more are discovering — that no matter who they vote for, the government always gets elected, and the same fundamental policies will be adopted? The greatest political protest that could be mounted, this year, would not be for people to content themselves with remaining in well-hidden protest cages, but to stay home on election day. As the voters of Florida discovered in 2000, your vote will have absolutely no impact on who is elected to office or what policies they will

pursue. The political establishment made that decision for you when they offered you the meaningless Bush/Kerry choice. But what kind of message might a ten percent voter turnout produce?

I have long believed — along with Leopold Kohr, and his student, E.F. Schumacher — in the virtues of smallness. Individuals are ground up and destroyed by large, collective systems, but small groupings provide for the face-to-face dealings that allow for both individuality and cooperation to coexist. The small town of Florissant, Colorado — located just a few miles from a town in which I once lived — affords an example of which I speak. Paco Bell, a donkey, just won re-election as mayor of this town, whose residents enjoy satirizing the insane political system. How might the political establishment react if, in a U.S. Senate race — in which the Republican candidates each promise to intrude more into your life, property, and paycheck — was suddenly exposed to a write-in campaign on behalf of someone like Paco Bell? If Caligula's horse could hold a seat in the Roman Senate, why not a donkey in Washington? What other meaningful choices do you have?

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