

# You Know Where I Stand

Thoughts on the 2004 Republican National Convention

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**August 30, 2004**

## **Elephants in NYC I: Mighty Morphin' Mavericks for Bush**

Tonight was the first evening of the Republican National Convention in New York, featuring speeches by John McCain and Rudy Giuliani. As I watched both men speak, I wondered why there are so few truly powerful Republican orators. Any number of people can give terrific, moving speeches, and I thought both men did just that tonight, but I'm referring more to the captivating style that actually leads you from one place to another, in the style of a Clinton, Cuomo, or Reagan. The one person who comes to mind is Colin Powell, who is a fantastic speaker, but is strangely absent from the entire convention. Under normal circumstances, I would expect the party to highlight Powell in much the same way as the other moderates are being celebrated. He is not only not speaking in prime time; I don't believe he is even present.

I find it interesting that in the weeks leading up to the convention, we were told that the Republicans were placing McCain, Giuliani, Schwarzenegger, and Pataki in prime time to give the party a more moderate, kinder and gentler face. Instead, McCain and Giuliani, who both do indeed appeal to independents and some Democrats, spoke entirely on foreign policy and the war and terror, and emphasized leadership, resoluteness, and strength above all else. The language was dominated by military references and sports analogies. I found both speeches highly effective, and would not be surprised to learn that some undecided voters were persuaded, but they were certainly directed more at men than the proverbial soccer moms or moderate, recycling suburbanites.

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Lastly, let me join those who believe the Giuliani was also using his moment to reintroduce himself to the Republican Party and put himself in a better position for a future race, statewide or nationally. There were two moments in the first 15 minutes that convinced me of that. First, when he talked about how he was not used to seeing so many Republicans in New York City and used the line, "I finally feel at home." What a great way to connect with a party he is often at odds with and say by inference, "I am one of you."

The second moment came when he told the story of turning to his police commissioner soon after September 11th and saying, "Thank God George Bush is our President." This line shows loyalty to and respect for the president, but it also connects well with social conservatives who would not expect that sort of rhetoric from Giuliani.

Overall, a very well done night that, unfortunately, was largely unseen by most of the country. Each evening only increases in importance from here forward.

## **August 31, 2004**

### **Elephants in NYC II: Blessed Assurance**

This evening's Republican Convention belonged to Arnold Schwarzenegger and the First Lady. I thought the evening went very well. Both speeches were designed to assure undecided voters of all kinds, particularly, women, immigrants, and those not passionately aligned with either political party.

The first night emphasized why this is a moment of history that deserves your political attention. You may not have considered voting for Bush, but once you understand the danger we are in, his leadership in these extraordinary times, and his determination to defend the country and defeat terrorism, you will give Bush and the convention a brief opportunity to win your vote. For these voters, it is a great thing that this message is being delivered by a Giuliani instead of an Ashcroft.

Night one leads directly into the second night. You've allowed yourself to at least consider voting for Bush, but you're still uncomfortable with the idea. You've heard so many persistent claims about the President and his party; the rush to war, the cowboy approach to the military, the relentless effort to serve and benefit the wealthy. Who is this man? Can he be trusted? Does he have a cavalier approach to matters of life and death? What do Republicans believe in and stand for? And how does that differ from Democrats?

The second night was meant to assure you that Bush is a safe and reasonable choice. Laura Bush attempted to answer the first three questions by painting a picture of a loving, caring man who agonized over the decision to go to war. Arnold addressed the last two by appealing to our patriotism. His speech allowed us to see America through the eyes of immigrants. He also gave a passionate view of what it means to be a Republican in clear, uncompromising language. I thought his speech was the best delivered of the convention so far. Why? He showed a unique ability (by being at once charming and forceful) to appeal to both the unconvinced and convinced.

The worst moment of the night? The speech by the Bush daughters. First, they came across as a bit rough and immature. They are 22-year old college graduates whose father is the President of the United States in what we are constantly told is a pivotal, dangerous time in history, and they happily admit to being uninterested in politics and world affairs. How can the president convince the country of the urgency of this moment and the critical role of politics if his own daughters are unsure?

Second, in their flippant comments about their out-of-touch grandmother, Barbara (including the line, "We love you, but you're just not hip") they reminded me way too much of the parking lot girls in Fried Green Tomatoes. If you recall, two over-dressed girls steal a parking space from the middle-aged Kathy Bates and then taunt her with "Face it, we're just younger and faster!"

Bates later drives into their car multiple times with glee and responds, "Face it girls, I'm older and have more insurance."

**September 1, 2004**

### **Elephants in NYC III: Fire, Meet Brimstone**

The third night of the Republican Convention featured Democratic Senator Zel Miller and Vice President Dick Cheney. If you're following along with my day one and day two reports, here's where we stand:

Day One: Bush deserves a chance

Day Two: He's not crazy, really!

Day Three: Kerry is

Of course, I'm simplifying a bit. The Republicans decided to go with the traditional convention approach by having the third night be the most aggressive attack on the opponent. I've read that Republicans are comfortable with attacking Kerry rather heavily because the president is fully defined in most American's minds, whereas Kerry is still in the middle of that process. If it's up to Zel Miller, I'm fairly certain most voters wouldn't allow Kerry to coach a little league team by the time the campaign is over.

I'm very curious to see how this evening played out with the undecided voter, particularly the recycling suburbanites. Miller's speech was certainly passionate, but it was also undeniably angry and fairly personal in its attacks. I can't help but compare it to Pat Buchanan's speech in 1992, in tone if not content. I completely understand his frustration with his party, but don't know how that anger came across on television. Obviously, the converted were thrilled, and thrilling the converted is certainly an essential part of a convention, but if someone tuned in on Monday and was persuaded to give Bush and the Republicans a chance over the next two days, he or she may be a bit more uncomfortable tonight.

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Cheney's speech was very much what I would expect. Each one is of the same style and delivery as the last; only the content changes. I believe he increased the number of people who would consider voting for Bush in 2000, simply by his stature, experience, and forceful personality. In this election, he doesn't broaden the party, but he does hold together the base. This evening, he did a fine job of coming across as clear and confident, particularly while delivery the best line of the night:

*Senator Kerry says he sees two Americas. It makes the whole thing mutual - America sees two John Kerrys.*

## **September 2, 2004**

### **Elephants in NYC IV: Stand and Deliver**

We've reached the final night of the Republican Convention and President Bush's acceptance speech. Before he spoke, Gov. Pataki introduced the president with a slightly above average speech, one that did include a great line.

*This is a candidate who has to Google his own name to find out where he stands.*

I still find it difficult to imagine Pataki as a national candidate, but stranger things have happened. I found the video introduction to Bush to be a bit too much like a Disney movie about a boy and his dog. However, the closing piece on Bush's appearance at Yankee Stadium following 9/11 was a perfect conclusion and one that I fell for completely. I remember watching the moment with Ben together, so relieved to have a World Series to watch and discuss instead of the unrelenting news that featured far too many sirens and screams. And I remember being nearly overwhelmed at the sight of 55,000 New Yorkers chanting "USA" as the president stood on the mound. I won't forget the sense that whatever we as a nation faced, we would rise above.

I though Bush's speech was nearly perfect. Compared to Kerry's acceptance speech, it was a remarkable achievement. Bush gave the best performance of his political life. He paced himself perfectly, never seemed rushed, and his body language was relaxed and confident.

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The speech itself was very well structured and lacked any terribly embarrassing moments that will seem out of place in the months ahead. The overall theme, that this will be liberty's century, was terrific. It encompassed both his domestic policy, focusing on the creation of an ownership society in the areas of health care, retirement, jobs and housing, and his foreign policy, focusing on terrorism and Iraq. The domestic policy section was a bit too similar to a State of the Union speech in my opinion, but without it I'm sure there would be criticism about the lack of details.

Bush contrasted his record with that of Kerry at different junctions in the speech, making short, direct points without falling into a larger attack. The recurring theme was "You know where I stand," which even his critics would concede and directly confronts one of Kerry's greatest weaknesses. Overall, a job well done.

## **September 3, 2004**

### **What Not to Do**

Following the president's acceptance speech, Senator Kerry decided he had had enough and staged a midnight rally in order to defend his honor and attack the White House. I understand the reasoning of the Kerry camp. There has been a fairly substantial change in the polls in the last two weeks, with more bad news likely in the next few days. Rather than play it safe and above the fray, the Republicans did not hesitate to attack the Democrats throughout the four-day convention, including, somewhat uniquely, the acceptance speech itself. Many in the Democratic Party have grown frustrated with the lack of energy and momentum in the Kerry campaign and are fearful that another Massachusetts candidate will fail to be aggressive in responding to attacks.

So, after two weeks of relative obscurity, John Kerry decided it was time to reintroduce himself to America. How? By giving an angry, dismissive, ungracious speech of his own; directly attacking the president and vice-president, including their service (or lack thereof) during Vietnam.

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Fair criticism or not, it's difficult to try to remain above petty, angry, attack politics while shouting "I'll tell you who's unfit to serve." The speech could be summed up this way: *No, you are!*

Kerry also came out against the war in the strongest terms yet, essentially claiming the mantle of anti-war candidate. In fact, it became difficult to imagine how his speech would differ from one given by Michael Moore (complete with references to Halliburton and the Saudis).

All of this can do great wonders for your base, but the only chance Kerry has to win is to convince undecided voters that he is a safe, strong on defense, moderate Democrat in the (perceived) Clinton tradition and not a Dukakis, Mondale or Humphrey.

**I'm afraid the Republicans have managed to frustrate Kerry into defending himself down to defeat.** In his attempt to stand up to the attacks and show his fire and conviction, he has become exactly what the Republicans wanted: an out-of-the-mainstream, big government, anti-war, flustered, protesting, liberal from Massachusetts.

Check or checkmate?