

George W. Bush in Philadelphia: the politics of illusion

The Editorial Board
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The Republican National Convention, which opened Monday in Philadelphia, marks a further stage in the decay of American bourgeois politics. The events taking place on the rostrum and the convention floor are exercises in Madison Avenue image-making, whose essential purpose is to mask the reactionary and widely unpopular policies of the Republican Party and its presidential candidate.

The Bush campaign unabashedly proclaims its goal of staging the convention as an elaborate television infomercial, and a compliant media judges the affair solely by the degree to which it succeeds in adhering to that script.

So gaping is the disparity between image and reality that the convention is at once ludicrous and grotesque. The Republican Party, for decades the spearhead of attacks on working people, minorities and the poor, is dressing up in the garb of “compassionate conservatism.” Blacks, Hispanics, women and disabled people are being brought forward as speakers in an effort to show the “inclusivity” and “tolerance” for which the right-wing Texas oil millionaire George W. Bush and his oil millionaire running mate Richard Cheney supposedly stand. The keynote speaker Monday night was the most prominent black Republican, retired General Colin Powell, while Newt Gingrich and others identified with racist and Christian fundamentalist elements have been shunted to the sidelines.

The social physiognomy of the convention delegates belies the pretense of openness. According to polls of the delegates, some 90 percent are white, only four percent black and three percent Hispanic. The majority are politicians, lawyers and businessmen, and between one fifth and one quarter are millionaires.

Their politics are overwhelmingly of the ultra-right—according to one poll, only 37 percent support Bush's own proposal for limited prescription drug coverage under Medicare, while the majority oppose it as a “big government” measure. At least 20 percent of the delegates are members of the National Rifle Association. A similar proportion, if not larger, are members of the Christian Coalition and similar fundamentalist groups.

The political platform drafted over the weekend and ratified by the Republican National Committee on Monday morning is a document of the far right, calling for constitutional amendments to ban abortion and impose prayer in the public schools, and rejecting any sanctions on discrimination against homosexuals. The cosmetic changes in the program instituted by the Bush campaign, such as deleting the call for the abolition of the federal Department of Education, are actually opposed by the majority of the delegates.

The social gulf between the convention delegates and the working class was displayed most openly on Sunday evening, when the delegates crossed the river from Philadelphia to a gala held on the waterfront of Camden, New Jersey. Five thousand delegates enjoyed wine, hors d'oeuvres and a display of fireworks, while hundreds of uniformed state troopers and city police established a cordon to insure there would be no contact with the population of the city, one of the poorest in America. New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman spent \$50 million in state funds to prepare the banquet site, which involved demolishing flophouses and bars within site of the pier. Meanwhile Camden is so poverty-ridden and burdened with debt, the city government has been taken over by the state.

To call the Republican convention stage-managed is to speak the literal truth. According to an account in the *New York Times*, the convention's chief organizer, Andrew Card, former Secretary of Transportation in the administration of Bush's father, held a planning meeting last week at which he and his staff blocked out each of the four nights of the convention in five-minute segments, prescribing every action to be taken between 7:30 p.m. and 11 p.m., the hours of prime-time coverage.

Every speech has been vetted by the Bush campaign, so that each night the speakers will conform to the theme chosen for that occasion. The schedule reads like a self-parody. Monday night was dedicated to “opportunity with a purpose;” Tuesday's theme is “strength and security with a purpose;” Wednesday is devoted to “prosperity with a

purpose;” and on Thursday, George W. Bush will accept the nomination and pledge to be a “president with a purpose.”

There is more involved here than public relations. The four-day celebration of Republican unity behind Bush can only be sustained by suppressing any discussion of real issues. Were such a discussion to take place, even within the narrow spectrum from right to far-right, which is all that exists in the Republican Party, the likelihood is great that uncontrollable conflicts would erupt. Suffice it to say that if Powell, the first night's keynote speaker, were to forcefully present his views on social questions like abortion and affirmative action, he would risk being booed off the stage.

No less shameless than the theatrics on the rostrum is the influence peddling that goes on behind the scenes. There is barely an attempt to conceal the fact that the convention is financed by corporate donations, and that the more serious business is conducted at parties, outings and closed-door meetings between Republican politicians and corporate big shots and lobbyists.

The *Wall Street Journal* all but acknowledged that the political system is for sale to the highest bidder, headlining its front page article on the opening of the Republican Convention: “Bush's Donors Have a Long Wish-List and Expect Results.” The biggest donors include the oil, tobacco, chemicals and pharmaceuticals industries, and their wish list includes the gutting of safety and environmental regulations, more massive tax cuts and limits on class action law suits.

It is not fundamentally different in the Democratic camp of Al Gore. Notes the *Journal*, “If Al Gore became president, he would carry his own set of financial backers with their own special interests.”

As Clinton's former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich admitted in a column in *USA Today*, “The Philadelphia big-money convention will be almost identical to the one in LA two weeks later, because most of those who attend the first will also attend the second. They've invested in both campaigns, diversifying their portfolios as wise risk-managers do.”

The contrived and orchestrated character of the Republican convention is not merely an external aspect of the event. The fact that the major parties are obliged to rely on cheap theatrics and avoid any discussion of pressing social questions—poverty, the lack of health insurance, the crisis in education, urban decay—reflects the degree to which the electoral process has become devoid of any genuine democratic content. This political decay is rooted in the social polarization that has grown in America to enormous proportions over the past quarter century.

The US is more deeply divided along class lines than at any time in its history. Never has the gulf been so vast between the wealthy and privileged elite, the top five

percent, and the rest of the population. The official two-party system is oriented exclusively to the social interests of that top layer, and increasingly unable to make even a token gesture of concern for the vast majority who have not cashed in on the stock market boom. Bush's “compassionate conservatism” is nothing more than a Republican version of Clinton's politics of empathy—feeling your pain while causing more of it.

Three or four decades ago, the nominating conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties were still significant political forums at which real decisions were made and real conflicts were fought out over nominations and political programs. Both parties, while controlled by big business and dedicated to the defense of the profit system, had broad bases of support within the general population. They were obliged to take into account the sentiments of different constituencies beyond the narrow political and economic elite—the trade unions and black and minority workers, as well as liberal sections of the middle class, in the case of the Democrats; family farmers, small businessmen and small-town America generally, in the case of the Republicans.

Over a protracted period, as both parties have moved steadily to the right, their social base has narrowed to the point that neither party arouses any genuine feeling from the great mass of the American people—except perhaps contempt. The vast majority of Americans will neither watch the conventions nor pay much attention to them.

The corporate and political elite has apparently convinced itself that it can rule by means of smoke and mirrors. But the politics of illusion is a form of self-delusion. It is an unwitting admission that the existing political superstructure is morally and intellectually bankrupt.

The American political system has become so calcified that it provides no outlet, either for self-correcting criticism within the capitalist parties themselves, or for any expression of the real sentiments and needs of masses of people. The artificial, bizarre and increasingly irrelevant process of image-making and media manipulation goes on, while vast social tensions are building up, leading inexorably toward social upheavals for which the ruling elite is ill prepared.



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