

# RETURNING TO BOSTON

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As I emerged from the T station, the year's first snowfall greeted my face. I was back in Harvard Square, where I had lived the preceding summer while interning at the Democratic National Convention. I was pleased to return, but I knew it was to a different place. Out of Town News, Harvard Yard, the Quad, Felipe's Taqueria: none of them were the same—the landscape had changed. The musicians had left the streets to find a lonely coffeehouse mic. The LaRouche proselytizers had left to hibernate for another four years. The tee shirts and sandals of summer sun had retreated in the face of winter's austere countenance. My political innocence was gone, as well. Two weeks ago, the election had fallen upon me with all the heavy weight of reality. Challenged by the outcome, I was a changed person looking at a changed landscape: over everything, an inch of fresh snow.

I walked slowly to my friend's dorm where I would be spending the weekend. Quiet lingered in the air. I could hear the soft crunch of New Balance on slush. It was as if the election had hastened the arrival of winter, as if the capitol of liberal politics was eager to retreat to the safety of the fireside. There, in oak-paneled studies with bookcases, thinking citizens would insulate themselves from the anti-intellectual New America, thumbing endlessly through back copies of the *New Yorker*, mourning past evocations of hope and possibility. I peered through the humble Puritan windowpanes along Dunster Street, convinced that those citizens were in each room. I watched my breath disappear in the falling snow, wondering where American borders really lie.

Byron E. Shafer opens his book *Bifurcated Politics* by admitting, "Even in an era when it is widely viewed as an institution in decline, the national party convention retains a certain immediate, raw, and visceral fascination" (1). I can sympathize. As a young politico working the convention, being in such a high-level political environment was exciting. I spoke to Jesse Jackson and James Carville on the phone. Terry McAuliffe (T-Mac to those in the know) was constantly in my midst. I shook hands with Barack Obama and Larry David, and I took a picture with George McGovern. Teresa Heinz Kerry signed my poster. I patiently awaited my CNN interview with cellphone in hand and credentials around my neck.

What I was less apt to recognize was the "institution in decline" part of the experience. We the convention committee (in order to form a more perfect union), perched atop a skyscraper looking down on the Old State House, would hear about Mayor Menino's problems with the police union. We would hear that Boston was going to lose—rather than gain, as was originally believed—significant sums of money on the convention. We would hear the complaints of Bostonians: too much traffic, altered public transportation, increased terrorist threat. We would hear, but we weren't

really listening. After all, they, the complainers, were on the outside. They couldn't understand that it was all necessary. What did they know?

In her essay "Insider Baseball," Joan Didion speaks to my experience. Writing about the Dukakis campaign of 1988, she considers the "assumption" of people within politics that "the narrative should be not just written only by its own specialists but also legible only to its own specialists" (50). Part of me thought that since I had an ID card that said DNC 2004 on it, I was more qualified to assess the convention. Those on the other side of the glass didn't really know what they were talking about.

Didion also details a scene in which Dukakis plays catch with one of his campaign aides on an airport tarmac. Didion writes:

What we had in the tarmac arrival with ball tossing, then, was an understanding: a repeated moment witnessed by many people, all of whom believed it to be a setup and yet most of whom believed that only an outsider, only someone too "naïve" to know the rules of the game, would so describe it. (65)

Damned if I would be naïve. A friend of mine who had worked on the Dean campaign in New Hampshire (and was now in Vietnam on a fellowship) complained about the unnecessary level of control and choreography that he saw going into the convention. I told him it was all necessary: the lighting cues, the careful choice of music, the placement of the delegations on the floor, the speakers' obligation to submit speeches beforehand for approval. "We can't risk a disorganized appearance," I insisted, "there is too much at stake." What we needed, I believed (not uniquely, I might add), was to project an image of unified professionalism that would dispel, among other things, notions of a party torn by an extraordinarily divisive primary season. John Kerry was our man, and he would deliver us from George W. Bush's dark presidency. Any calls for a more natural political forum misunderstood political strategy. Those who made those calls were, by definition, "outsiders."

The narrative of insiderism that the convention unwittingly created proved to be destructive to its appeal. A bubble—dreaded in theory, embraced in practice—surrounded all things DNC. I remember on Thursday night, the last night of the whole spectacle, my friend Eric, who was interning for CNN, was able to get me into a party at the Roxy. Maroon 5 played the event. In the middle of the set, John Edwards—sleeves rolled up, tie loosened, mic in hand—appeared onstage in front of a dramatic green light as a fog machine did its thing. He looked heroic, almost godlike. He engaged the crowd: "This may look like a concert, this may feel like a concert, and this may sound like a concert." The crowd quieted. We waited for his words. "But this is a movement." We erupted. We were, of course, ready to cheer.

Even this memory—one I recall so fondly—has paled since the election. Whereas I originally experienced it in terms of Shafer's raw, visceral fascination, now I can't help but see the shadow of decay about it, evidence of a declining institution. There I

stood with two different credentials (one for the Fleet, one for the Roxy) in the plastic sleeve on my “Democrats Win It in the Field” lanyard, supposedly affirming some sort of “movement.” Was this the field? Was this where we were supposed to win it? After leaving one closed event, I was now at another closed event, both of which had further levels of exclusivity within them. Even worse, we—supposedly the party of the First Amendment—feared protests so much that we restricted peaceful demonstrations to an aptly named “Free Speech Zone” festooned with nets to “protect the delegates.” On the closing night of the convention, I stared as hundreds of police donned storm trooper riot gear and clogged the surrounding streets.

We assumed the movement Edwards referred to must have been some sort of popular uprising against the Republicans. But surely velvet ropes and nightsticks do not comprise a popular movement. In Boston, Massachusetts, the seat of leftist American politics, America’s foremost liberal party managed to hold a convention detested by the city’s citizens. Having always believed the Democrats to be a populist alternative to the stodgy GOP, I associated them with popular appeal. After all, Jules Witcover calls his history of the Democrats *Party of the People*. But the character of their convention—our convention, as it were—denied any such claim. In the end, far from anything I could have imagined earlier, exclusion may have been the name of the game. It certainly was at all of the satellite events: the Media Party in south Boston, the Rock the Vote party at the Avalon, the delegate parties throughout the week, the closing party at the Roxy. A prevailing insiderism dominated what was supposed to be our chance to show the country we were not a party of distant intellectual elites. It reminds me of my high school history teacher’s favorite phrase: “Lost opportunity.”

The parties, the symposiums, the caucuses, the book signings, the balloons, the music, the traffic, the t-shirts: all this, and for what? Conventions simply boost a general election season by approving a candidate already chosen. In reality, the DNC is little more than an extravagantly expensive gas station on the campaign trail. How expensive? The *Boston Globe* set the estimated cost of the convention at \$95 million (Klein). Is it really justifiable to put that much money into such a weak institution, an institution whose own biographer considers it to be declining? If the convention were to serve a more pivotal purpose, such funding might be excusable; but to throw so much money at ratifying a foregone conclusion seems downright irresponsible.

The convention as an institution has not always been so weak. It was not always like today’s incarnation, essentially a well-dressed figurehead strutting around with a practiced air of self-importance. In fact, political conventions began in 1832 as a reaction against the same elite class that today’s conventions serve to propel. It was the nation’s first third party of note, the Anti-Masons, which introduced the concept of a national political convention. In *Party of the People*, Witcover writes:

[The Anti-Mason convention] was born of a case of the suspected murder of one William Morgan, of Batavia, New York, a former member of the secret Society of

Freemasons who disappeared as he was about to publish an exposé of the society. Attempts to block its publication created demands for an investigation and ultimately a clamor against Masons in public office, culminating in a call for a convention to nominate a presidential candidate. (143)

Ironically, that convention nominated William Wirt, a rather uninteresting candidate who specifically stated his indifference to Masonry, to stand against Masons Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay (143). However, much like today's third parties, the Anti-Masons were less interested in a viable campaign than in national attention to their issues of import. As Shafer writes, "The quickest route to national stature was a presidential campaign, but the new party could hardly launch such a campaign with the dominant nominating device to that date, a caucus of party members in the U.S. Congress, because it possessed none" (9). From that point on, the national convention would replace the party caucus as the primary theater of presidential nomination. How strange it would be for the Anti-Masons to see the national convention, this child of theirs, existing today on the lifeblood of exclusivity and police security.

In terms of power, 1832 marked the beginning of a period that would last until 1952, at which point the convention began to look quite like the current ones. Within this period, the convention exhibited great power, deposing numerous sitting presidents, including John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and Chester Arthur. It also chose dark-horse candidates like James K. Polk (Shafer 15). Convention discourse centered mostly around the nominee in question, with some conventions featuring extended debate on whom to choose. But the decline of local political parties, as exemplified by New Deal legislation, had prepared the original convention character for its last hurrah in 1952. Shafer writes, "The Democratic convention of 1952 was the last of the classic old-style party gatherings and featured behavior which in its essence would have been familiar to convention participants a hundred years before" (33). He continues: "The product of this politicking, the candidate, had entered no primaries and engaged in no direct campaigning prior to his nomination" (33). Every convention thereafter demonstrated the shift of the nomination away from the convention itself and into the primary season, creating a movement towards today's condition in which the convention serves only to approve a decision already made.

That shift accelerated in 1968 due to the tumultuous Democratic convention in Chicago, at which tens of thousands of protestors took their dissent to the streets. Their calls for bringing the political process nearer to the people ushered in an era of reform politics that saw the proliferation of the primary season, one perceived solution to the problem of high-level political bureaucracy. As a result, the convention evolved into the weakened form it holds to this day (Shafer 42). Stripped of its original nominating function, the convention began to look more like a risk than an opportunity. The two election cycles of the 1970's demonstrated this idea. Shafer writes:

In 1972, a Democratic convention featuring deep divisions between the nominee and his challengers and between the nominee and some of his own delegates was paired with a Republican convention featuring little evident conflict in either area. Yet only four years later, it was the Republican convention which manifested the major candidate conflict, along with exacerbating issue divisions, while the Democratic convention escaped candidate splits entirely and surfaced only minor issue conflicts to fuel its limited struggles. (150)

In both 1972 and 1976, the party that presented a more unified convention won the general election. This contrast between unity and disunity, unity triumphing each time, proved to be a lesson politicians would not soon forget. With the potential for a divisive primary season constantly threatening to produce an image of a party in conflict, conventions began to focus energy on polished appearance rather than honest debate. Disunity, an ominous sign of weakness, took on the characteristics of a risk to avoid at all costs.

For better or for worse, it seems the Democrats know their history. The 1970s conventions set a precedent—unity at all costs—that the national parties emulate to this day. One can imagine T-Mac and convention CEO Rod O’Connor sitting in a well-lit office late at night pondering the official convention slogan. *America 2004: The Democratic Convention*, or *America 2004: A Stronger America?* The differences are subtle, even aesthetic. But by July 26, the message had changed from the former to the latter. There could be nothing weak about this convention; history warns as much. “Strong” necessarily conjures images of unity, for strength is predicated on organized support. At the expense of a real political forum, we proceed with this historically fortified notion of strength, for we have learned the lessons of the ’70s. Certainly “unschooled” has never been an accusation leveled at Democrats. Nevertheless, the Golden Age of conventions is dead, and even the current age declines. Surely Swinburne waxed rhetorical when he asked, “Is not Precedent a king of men?”

Now that the post-election pall had descended and winter had frozen over Harvard Square, I began to reevaluate my memories. After all, “we” had lost. This summer, good little Democrat that I was, I probably would have described the color of the convention as some sort of fluorescent blue. Now I might side with the dreaded gray. Neither red nor blue, Republican nor Democratic, just—gray. Perhaps my experience of disillusionment is simply a function of election depression. Or perhaps the election has been my apple, and I have eaten of it. Either way, I recall feeling like we had something—whether it was momentum, passion, or truth on our side, I’m not sure. But there was something that has faded now.

The November issue of *Harper’s*, which was released before the election, aptly demonstrates the Democrats’ obsession with presenting a united front. Ironically, it is

Luke Mitchell's essay about the Republican convention that accomplishes this, even as he lets the Democrats off the hook. He writes, "Whereas Kerry had struggled to create meaning—no matter how stupid, dishonest, or clichéd that meaning was—Bush's team seemed actively to be plotting its demise" (67). Mitchell treats Kerry kindly, keenly aware of the approaching Tuesday. Mitchell continues, considering the discussion that took place in the Garden:

These were half-narratives, made up of questions so preposterous as to end discussion and possibly even subvert our understanding of what it means to mean something. . . . The real message, radiating from the podium and echoing through the rafters, was that there was no message" (67).

It is not difficult to imagine a covert Luke Mitchell marooned in The Red Sea, subconsciously holding his nose while straining his ears to catch the words between the echoes. The fact that he couldn't decipher any message suggests that the Republicans know their historical precedents, too: Organization at the expense of meaning.

But now that the election is over and all may speak freely, one must wonder if Mitchell would still excuse Kerry. Perhaps not—I, for one, with hindsight shaded by the election, find his appraisal of the Republicans quite applicable to the Democrats. The Dems' platform professes "a profound optimism about our future—an optimism that springs from our great faith in America" (Strong 1). In terms of gritty policy-talk that one might expect from a political platform, the document sounds more like a stump speech. It avoids confronting Iraq, turning that question instead into a section called "Strengthening Our Military." It says, "We will add 40,000 new soldiers—not to increase the number of soldiers in Iraq, but to sustain our overseas deployments and prevent and prepare for other possible conflicts" (13). Worse, the title of the platform, the overall message, amounts to more of a non-message: "Strong at Home, Respected in the World." Who can argue with such a stance? Is it a stance? The statement is eternally malleable: Anyone could mold it to his or her particular ideology. It is both isolationist and internationalist. It is both militant and gradualist. In essence, it is both liberal and conservative. It draws no lines, because it comes down on the side of no one. Even as the Dems tried to learn from history's convenient lessons, they came up short. The Democratic message tried to be all things to all people—and still the electoral map bleeds endlessly. Perhaps we spoke directly to no one. Such is the risk of a politics of caution. In my own words, "There is too much at stake."

Mitchell realizes that risk. In a later passage in his essay, he discusses the effort of the Republican convention to appear completely inoffensive, an effort I found similar to the Democrats'. He tries to recount the atmosphere of the Garden to a friend, who refers him to E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. "It's the Marabar Caves," his friend tells him. Mitchell notes, "He was almost impossibly right." Forster describes the caves:



Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof. “Boum” is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or “bou-oum,” or “ou-boum,” utterly dull. Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce “boum.” (68)

In a literal sense, the Marabar Caves recall to me the first night of the convention, when I was sitting very high up in the Fleet Center, straining my ears to hear the Clintons. The echoes were definitely overwhelming at times, and I missed much of what was said. But Mitchell cites Forster to get at something deeper. What Mitchell is concerned about is the conscious decision to sterilize discourse, to the extent that blowing one’s nose and expressions of hope both sound like “boum.” Both parties are guilty of this transgression; most likely the Republicans just play the game better. Forster realizes this, too. In the same passage, he writes, “Echoes generate echoes.” Today, echoes generate elections.

As I approached Kirkland House, my friend’s Harvard dorm, I took my earbuds out so I could concentrate on the directions he had given me. First gate on the right, proceed into the courtyard, turn left, look for the dining hall. No one had shoveled the walkway in the courtyard yet; I left footprints in the snow as I walked towards the door. Through the tall windows, I could see chandeliers and crowded tables. It looked warm inside.

Months before, we had visited this building, often late at night, so that my friend (who also interned with me) could show me where he would be living for the next three years of college. Another friend of his was spending the summer in the next house over, Eliot House, so we would go there, too, and we would have long political discussions in the night. We were like the “pink-cheeked young aides” Didion recalls in her essay, thinking of ourselves, “innocent of irony and therefore history, as ‘the best and the brightest’” (56). It rarely—if ever—occurred to me that the next time I would return, winter’s cold winds would have swooped down on the wings of the election to clear the landscape. There was an air of immortality about our convention work that summer. I assumed victory and the concomitant vindication would have taken place by now. From the heights of the Fleet Center, defeat looked impossible.

In *The Politics of National Party Conventions*, David, Goldman and Bain write: “Convention decisions cut close to the great political concerns of any society: the allocation of political power, the purposes for which political power shall be used, and the further evolution of the political system” (2). As a representative institution, as a symbol of a larger political process, the convention does not bode well for the future of politics. If the characteristics of this summer’s Democratic convention were to continue—the tendency towards insiderism, the construction of the “boum”—American politics would have some work to do before it could once again call itself a worthwhile organ of a government that pretends to democracy.

Even now, in the wake of a disastrous election, the Democrats' discussion of the future seems less interested in lasting change than more of the same. Take, for example, the theater in which a recent discussion took place. The *New York Times* reports that "Most of the party's biggest names headed to former Clinton campaign adviser James Carville's party at the old Arkansas Gazette Building, which served as the headquarters of Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign. Some partied at Doe's Eat Place, an old Democratic hangout" (Democrats 1). That gathering sounds like a smaller version of this summer's convention: elite figures discussing the nation's future over cocktails. The words "old Democratic hangout" fall harshly upon my ears. But even the discourse itself comes up short. Governor Bill Richardson says, "I remember being on a trip with him in New Mexico: I put a cowboy hat on Senator Kerry and someone on his staff shuddered and asked me to stop. This is I think an example of the East Coast not connecting with the West Coast and with the rest of the country" (Nagourney 2). If Governor Richardson is right, this country is in a sad place: he believes it is more effective to pander to the "rest of the country" through empty props than actually to address issues they care about. Surely it's less—not more—of Richardson's theatrics that the political process needs.

Perhaps I am simply unschooled in politics' dark arts. Surely there are mysteries I cannot comprehend. After all, I am merely a has-been pink-cheeked young aide, stepping softly through the snow to meet up with my friend. If I was an insider before, by now I am a definite outsider. Apparently, you need not be one or the other to care. As for those thinking citizens, hibernating with stacks of the *New Yorker*, I found them in the Kirkland dining hall, discussing the Warren Court for a paper due in three days. Outside, on the trees and in the gardens, across the lawns and in the sky, the falling snow cleansed the canvas, painting over everything with a broad white stroke. Preparation for rebirth had already begun, for the winter always precedes the spring.

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