

On Television

When Conventions Mattered

By Reuven Frank

A FEW THINGS in life are certain. One is that when the broadcast networks announce how many fewer hours they will devote to the party conventions this summer than they did four years ago, prominent politicians will denounce them for greed, insensitivity and violation of the public trust. Their monopolistic hold on the nation's airwaves, it will be declared, should require them to bring the proceedings to America, gavel to gavel, as in the old days. The networks, just as predictably, will reply that conventions are no longer occasions of compelling news, but clumsily arranged week-long political commercials the parties hope to foist on viewers without coughing up the usual advertising rates.

Neither side will be speaking from personal knowledge. To begin with, in the truly old days—the golden era of radio—there was no gavel to gavel coverage. The chants of “We Want Willkie!” and the “voice from the sewers” urging Franklin D. Roosevelt to a third term came at a time when the networks covered the conventions sporadically and, as they do now, arbitrarily.

Gavel to gavel coverage began in

1948, while the infant television was finding its legs at great cost to the networks. There had to be programming to justify the sale of TV sets, but advertising income was not yet enough to equal the price of production. So having gone to the expense of shipping equipment, technicians, journalists, and managers to Philadelphia—where the two major parties and the Progressive Party decided to hold their conclaves because it was on TV's coaxial cable—the networks found a silver lining: They turned out the lights of their New York studios during the Republican and Democratic proceedings, sent the actors and musicians home on unpaid leave, and made their convention staffs fill the schedule. (The only entertainment program NBC continued to present from New York was *Howdy Doody*, a children's favorite and a significant profit earner.)

The “live” network in 1948, linking stations that could carry programs as they were being transmitted from New York, extended only from Boston in the North to Richmond, Virginia, in the South, with a spur from New York City to Schenectady. Cities everywhere outside that coastal strip received their convention reports by the U.S. Mail, in the form of blurry 16-

millimeter film recordings of the television pictures.

In 1952—more than half a century ago, well beyond the memory of most of those now arguing what the networks should cover—the conventions of the major parties were bursting with news. Both were held in Chicago, just a week apart, and the nominees who emerged were General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Illinois Governor Adlai E. Stevenson.

The Republicans convened first. Seven Southern states sent double delegations: a set of Eisenhower supporters and another committed to the candidacy of Ohio Senator Robert A. Taft, son of the 27th President. (The son profited from the father's record: Since Reconstruction, in what was still the Democrats' “Solid South,” a Republican could only obtain a patronage job at Federal offices and court-houses through political patronage during Republican Presidencies.)

The imminence of national political showdowns sold television sets. One manufacturer advertised in the *New York Times*:

“This year, you won't just read what a candidate says. You'll judge his physical and intellectual vigor—and whether he can ‘take it’ under pressure. . . . This year television assumes a new and profound role in your life—and in the life of America. See and know the man you vote for. Take a good long look. . . . Don't vote 'til you see the whites of their eyes!”

But when it came to the GOP Credentials Committee, public hunger was mocked. The chairman ruled that although reporters could attend the hearings, no cameras would be allowed in the room. The networks, reduced to stationing their equipment in the hallway, descended upon any committee member who came out for a break. Occasionally a reporter would rush out and explain what had been going on.

In between, the camera was fixed on the closed committee room door. Sometimes the anchorman could be heard updating another development, but the rest of the time there was only the din of the crowd. Within a day or two, the convention leadership was deluged with phone calls and telegrams from Republicans in the 38 states now reached by live pictures.

“Open the door,” they cried. “We look terrible. You are losing us the election!” And the cameras were invited in.

Taft’s forces controlled not only the Credentials Committee but also the Republican National Committee itself. Following a lot of wrangling, in full public view, the Taft delegations were approved. Eisenhower’s floor manager, Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., had planned all along to go over the party leadership’s head and appeal directly to the delegates. It was risky business, but given the committee’s approval of the Taft contingent, the cause would otherwise be lost. Lodge said he was sure the committee rulings would be overturned because of what the public—and presumably the delegates—had seen on television.

On Wednesday of convention week, the Credentials Committee report reached the floor. The first delegation to come up was Georgia, where the committee had ruled in favor of Taft. The proceedings were slow and cumbersome, interrupted repeatedly by a delegate requesting that his delegation be polled—often on minor matters like points of order. But the public was breathless.

Speaker after speaker ascended the podium to make the case for one candidate or the other. The last to rise for Taft was Illinois Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen, with rubbery jowls, curly gray hair and a voice like a cello. Appealing for unity, he pleaded with the assembled delegates not to subject the Grand Old Party to the obloquy of having its brass overruled.

Then he turned to the New York delegation, situated directly beneath the podium. On the aisle sat Governor Thomas E. Dewey, the losing Republican in the previous two Presidential contests, but still a force in the party. It was Dewey’s misfortune that his mustache and his overbite made him seem, when shown in profile, to be always chortling. Dirksen looked down at Dewey, pointing with his imperious pinkie. He recalled how often he, one of the Republicans’ most popular orators and fundraisers, had been to New York to help the party. He urged the delegation to rethink its support for Eisenhower. “We followed you before,” he said

in his buttery bass tones, “twice down the road to defeat.”

The hall erupted with cheers, shouts, boos, and catcalls. Banners waved, fists shook, no one remained seated. The band played unheard. The inherent divide in the Republican Party was on display. The galleries picked up the shouting. The cameras showed a newspaper photographer knocked down in the turmoil and a Wisconsin delegate carried out on a stretcher. The commotion lasted 23 minutes.

When Dirksen delivered his final paragraph it was an anticlimax. The

convention secretary called the roll of the states. After a long, tense process, the Eisenhower delegation from Georgia was seated, 607 to 531. The nomination duly followed. California Governor Earl Warren declined the second spot on the ticket, but urged Eisenhower to select Senator Richard M. Nixon as his running mate to appease the conservatives in the party. The choice was accepted by acclamation.

THE REPUBLICANS LEFT, the hall was swept, and a week later the Democrats arrived. They were determined not to make the blunders they had seen their opponents commit. The party’s national chairman announced that there would be no closed-door meetings. Every delegate and alternate found a small card on his seat warning: “Watch yourself. You may be on television.” They were instructed not to read newspapers, or yawn, or flash fancy jewelry. Privately, the word was to beware of lipreaders.

Television had already played a big part in the Democrats’ march to Chicago. The largest number of pledged delegates belonged to Tennessee junior Senator Estes Kefauver, who had become a national hero during the televised hear-

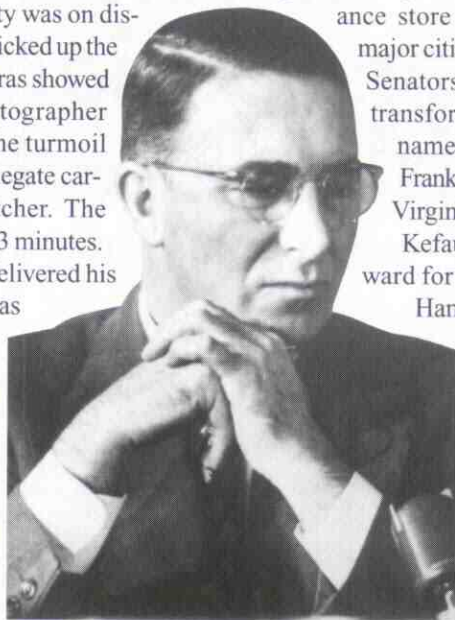
ings of his Senate Special Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce—the medium’s initial live news “hit.” Five decades on it is difficult to comprehend the impact of those hearings: Crowds gathered in front of appliance store windows in all the major cities; virtual unknowns, Senators and gangsters were transformed into household names—Rudolph Halley, Frank Costello, Karl Mundt, Virginia Hill.

Kefauver put his name forward for President in the New Hampshire primary, the first ever covered on television. He defeated an obscure politician campaigning as a stand-in for President Harry S. Truman, who, when his man was defeated, appeared on television to withdraw from the race. In

those days, however, primaries were not yet held in enough states to ensure the victor the nomination. The party organization, from Truman down the line, wanted Stevenson as the nominee, and they got their way.

But in the run up the floor fights were intense. On Thursday, July 24, the gavel sounded shortly after noon. The chair announced the roll call of the states to put forth names in nomination. There were snake dances and points of order, hijinks and the polling of delegations. After 11 hours only nine names had been placed in nomination. Kefauver was nominated near midnight.

His floor manager, Illinois Senator Paul H. Douglas, a doughty fighter and a distinguished liberal, needed time to organize an anti-Stevenson coalition and moved for adjournment. Texas’ Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the House and chairman of the convention, refused. One of the indelible images of that week is Douglas standing below the podium, shouting up at Rayburn, his face dark, his veins protruding, demanding recognition. John Chancellor, then a beginning radio reporter, told me later that he was standing



ESTES KEFAUVER

in the back of the hall with Douglas' daughter who was muttering, "No, daddy, please don't. Oh, be careful."

The session did not adjourn, and on the third ballot Stevenson was nominated. That was the last time either party has required more than one convention ballot to pick its standard bearer. (In 1956, a renominated Stevenson let the convention pick his running mate. It took two ballots for Kefauver to beat Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy—the last ever second ballot.)

By the time Stevenson prevailed it was well past midnight. Periodically the cameras peered outside at the crowd waiting with their tickets for the evening session that was not to be. Conventions these days are limited to four evening sessions. In 1952 the Democrats scheduled five days of 10 sessions, day and evening. Because of Thursday's drama, an extra session was held Saturday morning to finish. There was conflict, disappointment and history.

The public's greatest concern is the selection of nominees. It has been some time since that was not known well before the opening gavel. In 1984 Walter Mondale, the former Minnesota Senator and Vice President under Jimmy Carter, would not disclose his running mate. On the Saturday before the start of the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, he announced that he would name New York Representative Geraldine A. Ferraro. The rest was speeches.

After Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, news occurred at the conventions even though the nominee was known in advance. They became the stage for spotlighting the two great issues of those American decades, civil rights and the Vietnam War. Protesters arrived not so much to confront the delegates but because the conventions were televised. "The whole world is watching!" the young demonstrators chanted in Chicago in 1968.

Four years earlier the Republican convention had proved a study in transition. The West and the South took over the party and nominated Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater. New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller was booed from the podium. Republican foot soldiers

began to display a nastiness that had not been in evidence before. When the revered former President Eisenhower, trying to ameliorate the widening divisions in his party, decried differences being exaggerated by "sensation-seeking colyumnists and commentators," an angry roar arose from the crowd, and hundreds turned to shake their fists at the broadcasting booths. Some in those booths told me later that they were genuinely fearful. "It's only a glass wall," one of them said.

Candidates' acceptance speeches remain worthy of network coverage because they are significant public policy events. But otherwise there is little journalism to be achieved nowadays at the conventions. Some will remember when every Monday the *New York Times* carried three or four reports on the sermons delivered in major churches the day before. Extensive convention broadcasts are similarly obsolete.

PRIMARIES have stolen the news value from the conventions, but there is more to it than that. From the beginning, tension existed between television journalists trying to report what seemed newsworthy and political managers who wanted to get the greatest possible promotion for their candidates and cause. (Journalists wince when politicians and political consultants refer to news coverage as "free media.")

Through the 19th century and most of the first half of the 20th this dynamic was not a problem. Political conventions generated news, and political news was a common interest, discussed and debated in barbershops and hiring halls almost as much as sports. Star reporters, like Elmer Davis, made reputations for the skill and wit they summoned forth in their newspaper convention dispatches. Radio coverage, too, was more journalism than publicity. Television alone eventually came to be viewed by members of the political class as the perfect propaganda vehicle. They also realized that it could be a menace—a forum where mistakes were magnified and weaknesses unmasked—

and should be approached with the utmost care and calculation.

In 1952 the Democrats' first day in Chicago was devoted to the party platform. It was nearly the end of the era when party platforms were taken seriously. Special interests lobbied to have their concerns addressed, and debates were rancorous. Most of the platform passed without contention, but the civil rights "plank" aroused animosities that were to roil the party for decades. In 1948 the Democrats, urged on by the young Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey of Minneapolis, had passed a fairly strong civil rights plank. "Come out of the shadows of states' rights," Humphrey implored the South, "and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights." Delegates from Mississippi and Alabama walked out of the convention to reassemble in Birmingham as the States' Rights ("Dixiecrat") Party, nominating South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond for President.

Truman won despite the Dixiecrats and the Progressive Party's nominee, Henry A. Wallace, siphoning off Democratic votes. The 1952 civil rights plank was not as divisive, but it made for loud, mean, riveting television.

Some time after midnight, Robert Doyle, the producer of the network pool that was the only set of cameras allowed on the floor itself, was arranging equipment for a feed at 6 A.M. to NBC's *Today* show, then the only network morning information program. As always happens when television cameras are being moved about, a crowd gathered. Doyle told me later that he noticed the boss of the Chicago Democratic machine, "Colonel" Jacob Arvey, in the crowd.

The two had met several times. Doyle walked over to Arvey and asked whether he had been watching the day's dramatic proceedings. The producer called it great television for giving viewers a real insight into how things worked. Arvey asked how many people were watching. Doyle, who had no idea, picked a number out of the air. Fifty million.

Arvey shook his head. "We can't do this anymore," he said. "Politicians can't be seen fighting."

And that, it would seem, was the beginning of the end.