

Political Conventions 2004: Let the games begin

By PATTY REINERT

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BOSTON -- Famed newspaper curmudgeon H.L. Mencken opined that a national political convention is as fascinating as a revival or a hanging.

"It is vulgar, it is ugly, it is stupid, it is tedious, it is hard upon both the cerebral centers and the gluteus maximus, and yet, it is somehow charming," he wrote in 1924. "One sits through long sessions wishing heartily that all the delegates and alternates were dead and in hell -- and then suddenly there comes a show so gaudy and hilarious, so melodramatic and obscene, so unimaginably exhilarating and preposterous that one lives a gorgeous year in an hour."

What about the modern convention, in the era of television? There seems to be two opinions about the elaborate presentations this year, first in Boston with the Democrats, and then in New York with the Republicans:

"All we have now is the vulgar and the gaudy, and it's not balanced by that exhilarating moment," said Stephen Hess, a political and media expert at Washington's Brookings Institution. "Unless you're a political junkie like me or an old-timer who still gets excited by balloon drops, don't expect much and then you won't be disappointed."

Not so, says Maureen Rose Curreri, CEO of Boston Balloon Events, one of the companies in charge of the Democratic National Convention's grand finale.

She is promising "an unforgettable moment" when John Kerry officially accepts his party's nomination Thursday night.

It's not just a balloon drop, she explained. "It's the Academy Awards of the balloon drop."

This weekend, as 35,000 delegates and journalists filled Boston's hotels and sidewalks, workers inside the Fleet Center hammered the final nails into an impressive stage and tested dozens of video screens. Occasional popping sounds and a few cries of dismay could be heard as crews gingerly threaded huge tube-shaped nets of balloons into the Fleet Center's rafters.

The red, white and blue sky will come wafting down on cue at the convention's climax as more than 100,000 biodegradable balloons and 1,000 pounds of tissue paper confetti are released onto the cheering crowd. It'll cost about \$250,000.

Building up to that moment over the next four days will be a carefully choreographed series of high-tech video presentations showcasing Kerry's boyhood, his military service in Vietnam, his years in public office and his family life. The images -- a required ingredient of any modern political convention -- will be projected on a giant 90-foot-by 70-foot screen above the stage, just under a huge American flag, as well as on dozens of smaller plasma screens that form the backdrop of the stage.

Convention organizers also have scheduled a slate of podium-pounding speeches by Democratic icons as well as tributes to the candidates by their wives and children. And Kerry's Vietnam veteran buddies also will take the stage, helping him drive home the theme of the first political convention since the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks: "Stronger at home, respected in the world."

Former U.S. Sen. Max Cleland of Georgia, who lost both legs and one arm while serving in Vietnam, will introduce Kerry, a decorated veteran turned war protester, Thursday night.

The images and slick presentation are a powerful way to both rally the party's base and tap into what Garth Jowett calls "that mysterious 10 percent," the undecided voters.

"Some kind of major half-hour movie, which shows the candidate as something straight out of a Hollywood romance movie, has now become de rigueur," said Jowett, a communications professor at the University of Houston. "You're now required to have such a movie extolling the virtues of your life."

A good line in a speech might also grab voters, but only momentarily, Jowett said, and most people who aren't already committed to Kerry or President Bush will likely make their decision based on a gut feeling of which candidate they like best.

"With Kerry, the polls indicate that people sort of like him, but they still don't know much about him," he said.

Besides the flashy video, which plays well not only on the convention floor, but also on television and the Internet, the performance of Kerry and Edwards' relatives also could help show the men "as real live human beings and not just political automatons," Jowett said.

"You're now buying a package when you vote," he said. "Ever since Hillary Clinton, you now look very closely at the wife."

Also affecting voter opinion, Jowett and Hess agree, will be the unscripted drama -- both outside the Fleet Center where numerous protests are planned, and inside where despite all planning, almost anything can happen.

Take, for example, Al and Tipper Gore's passionate and prolonged on-stage smooch at the 2000 convention in Los Angeles. Some timed it at 3 seconds; some insisted it was at least 7. Ralph complained it was a full 3 minutes, and four years later, nobody has forgotten it.

The stunt immediately became fodder for newspaper cartoonists and late-night TV, and political analysts squandered precious airtime debating whether the candidate's message was, "I'm no womanizer like Clinton," or simply, "I'm not aloof. I'm a fun-loving, spontaneous guy!"

Who knows what will happen this week, Hess said. "But if a candidate has to kiss his wife to make news, hey, wow, we're in trouble."

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