

Putting on a happy face for the party

Contributed by Victor Tan Chen
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The modern-day political convention, at its best, is a lovefest, where egos are coddled and factions appeased, and the party reemerges as a united front, singing the praises of their chosen leader. The Democratic National Convention has so far stuck to the script. After more than a year of sometimes brutal campaigning in the primary season, Democrats of every pedigree are coming together to pay their respects and collectively kiss the ring of the all-but-anointed Democratic candidate, John Kerry. One of the less-than-obvious singers of Kerry's praises was Dennis Kucinich, the Ohio congressman and the last person standing alongside Kerry in the Democratic primary race (at this point, just symbolically). "We Democrats are one," he said. "We are left, right, center. We are one for John Kerry." While the Kucinich railed against the "distortions and misrepresentations" that had brought the U.S. military in full force into Iraq, he maintained that a John Kerry victory would "not just be the victory of one party, but ... a victory of faith over cynicism."

The previous night the symbolism had been even more intense: at the podium was Howard Dean, the former governor from Vermont, once Kerry's chief rival for the nomination, the man who shocked many in the political establishment with the grassroots, Internet-enhanced campaign that his supporters waged. A moderate governor who, as presidential candidate, rallied liberal anger against Bush's foreign policy, Dean used to quip on the stump that "I represent the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party." He was speaking a different line last night. "We are all here to represent the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party," Dean declared, adding that he stood "shoulder to shoulder" with his former

As Dean ended his speech with an admonition that "only you have the power," fluorescent blue and red stripes billowed across the stadium-sized TV and the song "We Are Family" pumped through the speakers. It was jubilant; it was corny; it was what you expect of a convention. Like soldiers closing rank, each of the week's speakers "from liberal mavericks like Dennis Kucinich to centrists like Bill Clinton" have struck the same themes of unity (of party) and adulation (for Kerry). Kucinich, for instance, has taken the most radical position of any major Democrat against the Iraq War "he calls for an immediate withdrawal of troops, a highly improbable scenario even in a Kerry administration. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party platform approved this week outlines a strategy for Iraq that is all but the same as the Bush administration's, as Middle East expert Juan Cole has pointed out: There is no strong anti-war plank, and a Kerry administration would remain committed to staying in Iraq for the foreseeable future.

The spirit of solidarity has even sunk into the psyche of those Democrats who stand outside the party establishment "the young "Deaniacs" who brought the Vermont governor to the national stage last year, the multitudes of angry men and women who felt their anger channeled by Michael Moore's film Fahrenheit 9/11, the progressives who heard their ideals expressed most articulately by the congressman from Ohio. Both Dean and Moore spoke at a local forum sponsored by the Campaign for America's Future, a liberal think tank, this week. At the "Taking Back America" forum, organizers to the week's event as an "alternative convention." Sure enough, the rhetoric at the afternoon panel on Tuesday far surpassed the bland pronouncements at the convention hall. "You will not win this election by being weak-kneed and wishy-washy. The only way this is going to happen is if you be forthright and say what you believe ... If you [Kerry] move to the right, you will encourage millions to stay home "the people who are already discouraged" from voting. Moore, the baseball-capped, blue-jean-wearing, and just generally rumped documentary filmmaker who has been dubbed (by conservative critics) as the "leader of the hate and vitriol celebrity set," also fired back at his enemies. "They aren't," he said. "They're hate-triots. They believe in the politics of hate."

That said, even liberal warriors like Moore are slick and/or savvy enough to realize that they can't leave 2004 to the whims of wavering voters. Moore, a stalwart supporter of Green presidential candidate Ralph Nader in 2000, now has little patience for the 2004 re-contender. "A word about Ralph Nader," he said, as a chorus of Democratic boos cascaded down. "You've already done your job. The Democratic Party of 2004 is not the Democratic Party of 2000. The work has been done by Dean and Kucinich. Even the Al Gore of 2004 is not the Al Gore of 2000."

In truth, the party is still diverse and contentious in its thinking. This united front is just a temporary state of grace. Kucinich, the Ohio congressman and (still un-conceded) presidential candidate, hinted as much in interviews this week: He is throwing his support behind Kerry, he said, because after the election he believes the anti-war movement can convince Kerry to change his mind on Iraq. In other words, Democrats are going to do anything it takes to win "but if Kerry does win, the old battles are likely to resurface with renewed vigor.

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