

CONSTRAINED VISIONS

Essays pertaining to the mission by senior fellows and other friends

WHAT IF THEY HELD A CONVENTION AND NOBODY CAME?

Misunderstanding the lessons of 1992 and 1994

"We were asked to believe that the 1994 elections were won because Republicans got their vote out to an extraordinary degree, not that Republican ideas had come to be shared by a governing majority in American politics."
— Mike Pence

Even as the Republican National Convention wound down, the reviews that matter were already in — the television ratings were dismal.

That was true despite the made-for-TV format adopted by the party. And it was true despite widespread acclaim throughout the country by the metropolitan daily newspapers.

Gone was the cavernous setting of previous conventions. This convention was set in a more "intimate" hall, one where less than half of the party faithful could even see the podium.

Gone, too, (we were told) was the "divisiveness" of the 1992 convention. While the anchors of all the major networks did their best to highlight party disagreements on certain issues — abortion and affirmative action especially — even they acknowledged the moderate, cotton-ball imagery emanating from the podium, imagery thought to be appealing to the "mainstream."

So what happened? There was the explanation that the GOP did not have many serious followers in the general television audience. We were asked to believe that the 1994 elections were won because Republicans got their vote out to an extraordinary degree, not that Republican ideas had come to be shared by a governing majority in American politics.

Next it was explained that the convention lacked the conflict needed to generate good ratings. The media as liberals praised Pat Buchanan's magnanimity. The media as commercialists lamented that he did not liven things up a bit.

Finally it was said that the television viewer was dumb and getting dumber by the hour — to the point that he or she was no longer capable of sustained attention to the matters being weighed by the talking heads in the convention booth.

None of the above withstood discussion. Americans tuned out the GOP convention for the same reason the media and party elite loved it — *the coverage fit the content, the message was the medium.*

Think about coverage first. How many Republicans would depend on the likes of ABC, CBS or NBC to tell them about their party? Little of what went on at the convention was put on the air by any of the three networks. Indeed, the GOP gathering served as a mere backdrop for the networks' own "expert" opinion as to where the



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nation should be headed. There were analyses and focus groups *ad nauseam*, interrupted only grudgingly by the most truncated of video clips of whatever might be happening at the podium.

The low viewership said a lot about how the self-important national press covers a Republican convention. It said nothing about the average American's interest in the issues facing our nation. And content? The sad truth is that the Republican Party for all its success in generating media praise for the convention failed to present the personalities or principles of interest to its base constituency, the modern Reagan coalition.

An endless line of pro-choice women, AIDS activists and proponents of affirmative action may have struck a chord with the Washington press corps.

They bombed, however, in Peoria. Add to that the systematic exclusion from prime time of social conservatives and you have the makings of a real ratings buster.

Whether the elites in the media and the GOP like it or not, traditional pro-family conservatives make up the bedrock of modern Republican electoral success. And to the point here, they make up the majority of the potential audience for a GOP convention as well.

"Nick at Night" and the Family Channel must have done huge numbers that week.

— Mike Pence

NOT-SO-CLASSY BASKETBALL

Once upon a time there was a state that had a thrill-packed high school basketball tournament every March. Every school, large and small, participated in a sectional. Most schools had to play three games to win a sectional, but some schools only had to play two, according to the luck of the draw.

The sectional winners competed in regionals; the regional winners went to semistate. And, with the whole state watching, the final four competed in the state capital for the state championship. The Dome was packed, and the noise from the cheering was deafening.

Each year there was only one state champion team, and that team went down in history. People around the world talked about "Hoosier Hysteria." But then some people started thinking that the big schools were winning too many championships.

People felt sorry for the students from the smaller schools, forgetting that the students from the smaller schools, in reality, were the lucky ones because they had a better chance of making the team than the children from big schools. And just being on an Indiana high school basketball team is an honor and a privilege.

Anyway, they changed the state tournament so that schools competed with schools of similar size. Every year there were four state champions. But then people realized that almost no teams with short players were winning any of the four championships.

It's not fair, they said, to make children under six feet tall play against children who are over six feet tall. So each of the tournaments added two divisions: one for teams with tall players and one for teams with short players. Each year there were eight state champions. No one really knew who they were, but the trophy companies were happy.

Shortly after that, people started talking about how teams with poor three-point shooting never made the final rounds. Wouldn't students feel better — and after all, tournaments are for the students — if they knew they could compete with students with similar three-point shooting ability? So they added two more divisions to each tournament: one for the teams that made 50 percent of their three-point shots and one for the teams that made less. Every year there were 16 state champions.

But anyone who thought about it realized the tournament wasn't really fair because the ages of the players on the teams varied so much. It made people sick to think that some teams had mainly juniors on their varsity teams, and they had to play schools that had mostly seniors. So each tournament added four age divisions: one division for schools where the average age of the varsity players was 19; one division for schools where the average age of the varsity players was 18; one division for schools where the average age of the varsity players was 17; and one division for teams that had varsity players whose average age was less than 17. Every year there were 64 state champions. Some schools were adding on rooms for their trophy cases.

After a few years people started noticing that teams that couldn't make free throws or

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