

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 27, 2008 at 4:03pm

The greatest shows on earth?

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

In the interest of full disclosure, as they say, I will admit my collusion with showmanship at the very beginning of this article: The fact is that I watched the opening night of the Democratic Convention from 6:00 p.m. to midnight. But I'm not sure what I saw. Was this a solemn civic event or a political variation of "Entertainment Tonight?"

I'm a news freak, however, so I plan to watch the Republican Convention next week, too.

The problem is that I'm not sure why I'm watching either of them.

"The modern convention," as they have begun to be called, leads me to wonder whether or not we really have conventions at all anymore. At least in the conventional sense of the term. If urgent national business is being done there, we-the-people are neither seeing it nor being told about it. Worse, the business that used to be done there -- the nomination of a party candidate for the office of President of the United States of America -- has been done long ago and without benefit of convention. If it weren't for Hillary Clinton's insistence on the traditional roll call vote -- a practice ignored in recent conventions that is dismissive of the historical reality of a primary -- the whole essence of the electoral dimension of the convention would be forever lost to history. Let alone rethought and/or reconfirmed.

The also-ran task of nomination has been long a thing of the past. It was done on street corners and town halls from one end of the United States to another, by complicated arithmetical standards and with dazzling distinctions between counties and suburbs and voting districts. And when that didn't work, it was

done by telephone and behind closed doors as "superdelegates" were hard-pressed by party leaders to declare their support before the election was actually over.

Finally, the nomination process was completed when party officials agreed before to admit to the convention in full force the delegates from Florida and Michigan whose votes they had refused to count in the primary.

Obviously the "modern convention" is not about selecting a candidate. So what are they doing in Denver and the Twin Cities? And why?

Are they really having a "convention," in the traditional sense of the word. Or are they simply having a cheerleading competition? And will we only know who won it when the final votes are counted in November? If, of course, the votes can be correctly counted even then. After all, thanks to the 10-year-old computer program error in election machines that has finally been admitted by officials of the company that makes them, Premier Election Solutions, once Diebold, Inc., the whole notion of precise vote counting is in at least as much doubt as it's ever been. Computers or no computers.

In the meantime, as we watch main stage entertainment and panels of journalists do "vox pop" talk in four dialects -- conservative, liberal, independent and undecided -- not a resolution is passed or a question raised to distract the viewing public from the scene of hoopla in the name of democracy. So much for "serious national discussions" about major issues.

The event is a panoply of speeches -- over 60 of them on the first day of the Democratic convention alone -- during which delegates, we can see, sweep through the hall like schools of state fish. Given the usual running commentary that overrides the days, only snippets of each speech are available to the viewing public, despite the 17,000 reporters, editors, photographers and camera operators (*Aspen Times*, Aug. 27, 2008) that crowd the place. Everyone, it seems, is simply passing time until the prime time speeches begin: the public vetting of Michelle Obama as presumptive First Lady; the battle cry from that valiant old lion Teddy Kennedy; and from Hillary Clinton, the task no failed male contender was expected to shoulder -- responsibility for party unity by the candidate who won the popular vote but lost the election.

In the meantime, while the cheerleading practice goes on inside the hall, Denver outside looks like a city under siege. Armed police stand in tight bands ready to do battle with citizens who would like to be part of what isn't going on.

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In this highly touted technological world of ours, when major political news is being sent to wake people up at 3:00 a.m., you'd think we could do all of it some other way.

So why don't we?

Well, in the first place, the answer might well have something to do with capitalism, populist party or no populist party: The gathering of the faithful is a money tree for the cities that win the lottery to host the convention. The Democratic convention alone was budgeted at \$40 million, then overran that by at least \$10 million. Elections are cash cows these days. This one, some say, will cost close to a billion dollars before it's over.

Or, in the second place, maybe it's because both parties really are more about celebrity-making now than they are about the identification of seasoned civil servants and this is Oscar Night on CNN.

Whatever the underlying reason for such extravaganzas, you'd think that since all the business is apparently done elsewhere, we could have all watched the same thing, public and delegates alike, shot in front of three TV cameras in a large auditorium. And still had the same candidates.

From where I stand, there is no doubt that we are about to be treated to two weeks of political gala -- if anybody out there in voting land is really watching during the last week of summer vacation. All I know is that at least 20,000 delegates-to-Nothing plus the 20,000 or so others expected in tandem at both conventions will leave one big carbon footprint. Maybe that should be on the agenda. If there ever is an agenda again.

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