

A reporter's eye view of the DNC

By Peter Jones
Staff Writer



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exercise a quieter form of First Amendment expression.

One could hardly walk a yard before seeing more evidence of the week's convergence of

Democrats. Denver's body politic was clearly getting a workout — but it was Sunday and the town was just getting warmed up.

The Pepsi Generation

The security line outside the Pepsi Center constituted a virtual who's who of media, politicians and popular culture figures.

PBS's Margaret Warner stood behind me in line as we were instructed to remove all metallic objects from our persons. Before passing through the doors of the arena, I had rubbed elbows with the likes of CNN's Bill Schneider [sans hat], George Stephanopolos on a cell phone and onetime presidential hopeful Rep. Dennis Kucinich.

Others — attorney Gloria Allred and humorist Dave Barry, among them — would come later in the evening in the course of hallway cameos by the likes of Katie Couric and a Barack Obama look-alike who fooled a few would-be autograph seekers.

Although the press writing area behind the band offers an excellent look at a drummer's balding head, it also provides a panoramic view of the convention floor and its striking mix of the red, white and blue colors that have become mandatory at recent political con-

View: Getting a floor pass requires patience

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ventions.

Considering the three choices of colors, the signs noting the location of each state's delegation were inevitably, you guess it, blue. [I'm anticipating red state signs at the GOP convention.]

Reporters hustled in every location, both on the floor and off. Large posters by the box seats promote participating news organizations that range from Fox News to Aljazeera.

If you move your head around at just the right angle, you can actually see the Jimmy Carters of the world as they address the nation using a seemingly less-than-perfect teleprompter.

Tilt in a slightly different direction at the right moment and you may see a distracted CCN photographer Tom Munds literally bump into Nancy Pelosi on the convention floor.

The pecking order for passes and perks does not just ap-

ply to journalists.

Colorado and other prominent states had prime viewing locations on the convention floor. The relative "cheap seats" in the stands were relegated to Rhode Island, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and others.

Coveted floor passes do tend to excite the journalists who are able to receive them in 30-minute intervals. I took advantage of the opportunity to interview several South Metro members of the Colorado delegation, and the excitement on the floor was palpable.

But during the lower-profile speakers, there is a tendency among many delegates to chat amongst themselves as the speakers, at modest volume, read their speeches to a national television audience.

Getting a temporary floor pass is an exercise in patience. After finally stumbling on the right location to pick one up, finding one's way to the "floor" is not as easy as gravitational

generalities would imply.

As an old friend of mine who works at a Boulder radio station will confirm, one can spend a third of his half-hour allotment of floor time on a subterranean quest similar to that on the opening of the "Get Smart" TV series.

Just as you are about to give up and go back for more explicit directions from someone wearing a DNCC button, surprise left turn can inexplicably get you on the brightly colored floor.

Voila!

Conventional and unconventional highlights

A few other memories from Monday:

■ Ailing Sen. Ted Kennedy's rumored, but presumably unlikely appearance after a video tribute to the veteran lawmaker, who is looking more and more like his father, Joe.

■ Michelle Obama's highly anticipated speech and a surprise via-satellite appearance from her husband.

■ "The Daily Show's" John Oliver being kicked off the air by a conservative talk show host unamused by the interviewer's tongue-in-cheek questioning.

■ Beach balls being thrown about the floor as the house band sang, "We're going to have a funky good time."

I capped my evening off at a reception for Sen. Hillary Clinton at the Denver Art Museum.

A walk from 16th Street to the museum was eventful in and of itself. Anarchists had just been arrested after a disturbance on Court Street, a police officer told me.

I passed a number of police in riot gear and clown-dressed pranksters before finally making it to the schmoozer starring the former first lady.

Although the press had initially been segregated behind a partition, I made my way out of the pen to witness a number of teary eyes as Clinton finally appeared.

303-566-4109 |
pjones@ccnewspapers.com

A reporter's eye view of the DNC: Day 2

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"Hillary's husband."

The words filled the screen below the face of former President Clinton as he sang the praises of his wife in a video that preceded the New York Senator's Aug. 26 speech before the Democratic National Convention in Denver.

The moment of post-feminist irony elicited its share of woo-hoos and laughs, and it was not the only humorous moment as Barack Obama's former challenger urged party unity and support for the Democratic nominee.

Hillary's thank you to the "sisterhood of traveling pantsuits" raised another burst of audience solidarity and laughter.

Another of Tuesday's top quips came from Sen. Robert Casey, D-Pa. In a rallying cry against Republican Sen. John McCain, Casey noted that the presumed GOP nominee had voted with President Bush 90 percent of the time.

"That's not a maverick. That's a sidekick," said Casey, a "pro-life" Democrat.

After I'd had my fill rubbing elbows with the likes of Dee Dee Meyers and Rep. Henry Waxman at the snack bar, I took a walk outside the Pepsi Center to see how the other half lives.

I'd heard about the so-called "protest pen" on the far west end of the Pepsi Center parking lot so I set out on a quest past the field of media tents to find it.

I walked as far as the security perimeter would allow, but the fenced area supposedly provided to protest groups by the Secret Service and Denver Police was nowhere to be found.

The "pen" was likely

there somewhere beyond the mass of makeshift tents and fencing. But even so, in confirmation of complaints from groups like Recreate '68, it is safe to say that protesters have little opportunity to communicate or set eyes on delegates or other officials near the Pepsi Center grounds.

More easy to find is the Starz Film Center in the Tivoli, which is part of the secure convention area. At the home of the Denver Film Festival, a host of political panels and film screenings have been taking place all week.

A debate over the comparative merits of liberalism and conservatism and the relative goodness of humans boiled down to a simple argument over the moral behavior of infants.

"Babies are narcissistic," argued conservative commentator Daniel Prager. "The notion that we're good is nonsense."

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A reporter's eye view of the DNC: Day 3

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Liberal talk show host Thom Hartman countered that scientific studies have shown otherwise.

"Babies cringe when they see violence," he said. "They are capable of compassion."

A few other random observations from the DNC:

■ CNN's Suzanne Malveaux is very thin and petite — almost dainty — in person and does quite exclude the same authority she does on television.

■ The DNC has gone "green" with scores of clearly marked receptacles for plastic, paper and other disposables, each bin armed with a live human to make sure everything winds up in the right dispenser — but the snack bar has yet to figure out that chili is a no-no on a veggie dog.

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pjones@ccnewspapers.com

As Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid took the stage, thousands of antiwar protesters defiantly marched through the Auraria Campus en route to the Pepsi Center.

More than two dozen police officers dressed in riot gear guarded the campus entrance to the Democratic National Convention perimeter near the Tivoli building.

As protesters chanted "No war for empire," convention guests with official credentials ventured through the crowd, bending under gun muzzles on their way to hear former President Bill Clinton and vice presidential candidate Joe Biden.

So began my third day at the DNC in Denver as I prepared my own duck-and-cover into the bustling convention perimeter.

The goings-on outside the gate were nary a blip on the radar screen to 4,400 delegates and 16,000 media representatives scurrying inside the Pepsi Center.

On Thursday, Iraq Veterans Against the War, the group that had organized the unauthorized march, declared victory of a sort after it secured a meeting with a veterans liaison on Barack Obama's staff.

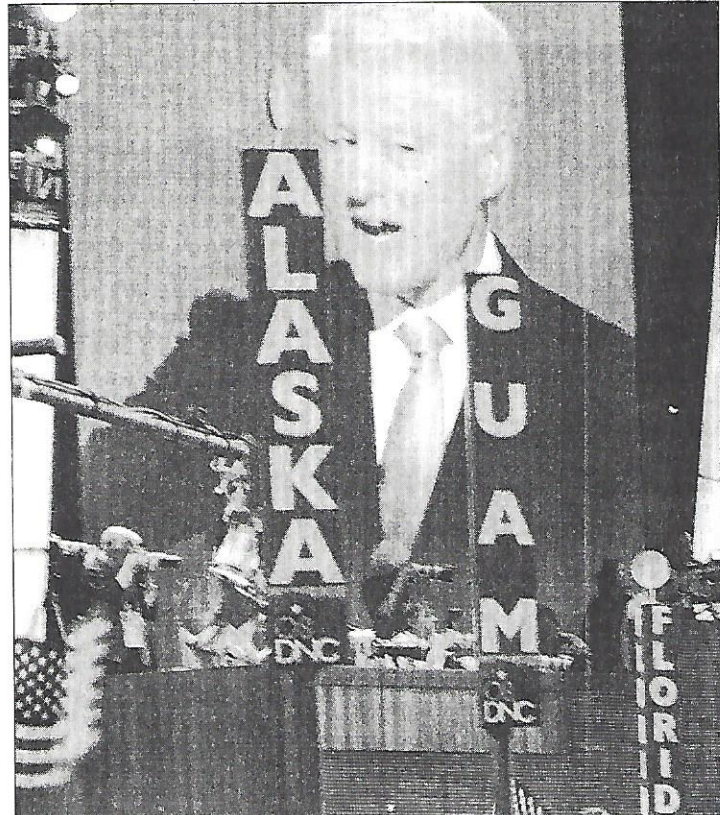
Crowds trying to find a seat inside the Pepsi Center were somewhat less victorious, however. Seats were at a premium as the throngs were ushered in to hear how fervently Clinton would endorse the Obama-Biden ticket.

Because my credentials did not indicate a specific reserved stand in the press writing area, I was denied access to my usual rotating perch behind the band on the first level. Too crowded, they said.

Head in hand, I took the escalator to the nosebleed section to see what I could see.

Not much, as it turned out.

But then, I was escorted to the next section, where I



Delegates wave flags in support of former President Bill Clinton Aug. 27 as he addressed the Democratic National Convention at the Pepsi Center in Denver. People packed the seats and aisles cheering and applauding the former president during his remarks supporting Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

Tom Munds |
tmunds@
ccnewspapers.
com

was instructed to walk down a crowded aisle — balancing my brief case and risking a likely fatal fall into the Puerto Rican delegation.

Voila, a seat!

Unlike the rest of the week during which I was surrounded by the ostensibly impartial press, this time I was sitting with a contingency of party activists.

As President Clinton hit the stage, virtually the entire room went wild in a sudden burst of applause, cheers and several minutes of unbridled standing ovation.

"Am I the only one here who's not a fan?" asked an unimpressed Democratic woman crouched in the seat next to me.

The speech continued.

"Hillary told us in no uncertain terms that she'll do everything she can to elect Barack Obama," Clinton told his fellow Democrats, alluding to Hillary's convention speech the previous night.

"That makes two of us."

"About time," the disgruntled audience member whispered in my ear.

And so on.

Clinton, a skilled orator by any measure, is a tough act to follow. And forced by circumstance to do so — and precede 2004 Democratic nominee John Kerry — was not Madeleine Albright nor Tom Daschle — but "ordinary citizen" and Denver native Beth Robinson.

The wife of an Iraq veteran and daughter-in-law of Arapahoe County Sheriff Grayson Robinson was one of several "everyday Americans" who were asked to speak on behalf of Obama at this year's convention.

By the time Biden took center stage, even the standing room in the building was pushing past capacity.

"I flew in for this event and I can't even get a seat!" a perturbed man complained to a Pepsi Center

handler.

As by this time I had given up my own seat for a call to nature, I watched much of the Biden speech on televisions spread throughout the arena's hallways and on an outdoor patio at the CNN Grill, as I made my way to the perimeter's exit.

I missed Obama's surprise cameo.

The grill, by the way, is the cable network's more-than-makeshift CNN-credentials-only restaurant on the site of the former [and soon to return] Brooklyn's sports bar.

For a four-day stay in Denver, the set-up is quite elaborate with a seemingly permanent sign fixture and flourishes that suggest the Hard Rock Café equivalent for news junkies.

As crowded as the Pepsi Center was Wednesday, I know that I ain't seen nothing yet, as I ready for jaunt to Thursday's rock concert ... err, Obama speech at Invesco Field.

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pjones@ccnewspapers.com

A reporter's eye view of the DNC: Day 4

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The final day of the Democratic National Convention delivered on its promise of crowds, chaos and a constant clamor for bottled water.

Although a rumored appearance by Bruce Springsteen did not materialize, Sen. Barack Obama nonetheless left the audience yelling for encores after a 45-minute acceptance of his party's nomination.

Obama's opening acts at the much-heralded event at Invesco Field at Mile High Aug. 28 included Stewie Wonder, Sheryl Crow, Michael McDonald and Oscar-winning former Vice President Al Gore.

The mayhem surrounding the finale — the first time a presidential candidate has accepted his nomination in a large open-air venue since John Kennedy in 1960 — began hours before Obama arrived at the stadium.

I joined a number of credentialed citizens and other convention guests at the Englewood light rail station. Although most of us assumed we would ride directly to the Invesco stop, we were instructed to disembark at the west Auraria campus station instead.

By then, lines were stretching around a campus building as others who had just left the train formed arbitrary new "lines" that led to nowhere.

"Is this the line?" I asked whomever would listen.

"I don't think anyone knows," someone said.

Eventually, police sorted things out and more or less organized us into a trail that weaved around a campus parking lot roughly one mile from Invesco.

As we stood in line, some newcomers attempted to form new lines that superseded ours — others simply butted in the real line at courtesy breaks at streets and alleys.

Police took care of that. In desperation, some

mavericks left the line in packs to brave their way up a nearby hill to cross Colfax Avenue. Theoretically, they would avoid the death march altogether for some unseen better world in which one can simply walk into the Invesco gates on the wings of angels.

Others with cell phones warned the malcontents of their fate — even longer lines on the south side of the stadium — but the renegades refused to listen.

It was a scene reminiscent of "The Poseidon Adventure" — the one in which Gene Hackman bravely challenges a group of human lemmings who insist on walking up to the sinking ship's bow, instead of counter-intuitively proceeding downward, as Hackman's professorial priest had deduced would be the ticket to safety.

I stuck with Hackman, metaphorically, and it paid off. I was in line behind a Congressional aide from Washington, D.C., — and I figured he couldn't be a lemming, right?

Two hours later, I had staked my claim in an Invesco media area. I had a great view of ... well, Charles Gibson's distinctive smirk. The media seating area was right behind an elevated row of television news sets.

The only thing standing between me and Barack Obama were the talent, crews and producers for ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox News and others — not to mention their sets, equipment and promotional banners.

As Gibson stared in my direction for some four hours waiting to take his cues, nary glancing at the action on the stage behind him, I would stand up and peer around his shoulders to catch a glimpse of Howard Dean, Martin Luther King III, John Legend and others who made their spoken and musical pitches for the Democratic nominee.

The moments with three members of the King family on the 45th anniversary of their father's "I Have a Dream" speech were among the day's most memorable events.

"Tonight, we witness in part what has become of [my father's] dream," Bernice King told the crowd. "The acceptance of a Democratic presidential nominee, decided not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character."

Meanwhile, CNN's John King tossed a football about as someone touched up George Stephanopoulos's make-up beneath the stage. Later, Gore drew analo-

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Day 4: Obama kept attention of the audience

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gies between the presidential profiles of Illinois Sen. Abraham Lincoln and Illinois Sen. Barack Obama.

The former vice president drew heavy applause when he played upon his own environmental priorities while chastising Republican Sen. John McCain for pledging to continue many of President Bush's policies.

"Hey, I believe in recycling, but that's ridiculous," Gore said.

As for Obama, he had the highly charged audience in the palm of his hand for most of his speech — causing the subsequent fireworks to take on an almost metaphorical meaning as the senator, his running mate Joe Biden and their families made repeated returns to the front of the stage.

A few other random observations from the DNC finale:

■ Throngs of Democratic fans doing the wave across sections of Invesco.

■ Activists passing out "Change" signs for ostensibly impartial journalists to hold just prior to Obama's appearance.

■ Rural Indiana "everyman" Barney Smith closing his folksy endorsement of Obama by saying, "America can't afford more of the same. We need a president who puts Barney Smith before Smith Barney."

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