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A Camelot for Donkeys
By Ben Boychuk

In the grand tradition of Jack, Bobby, and Teddy, delegates fled the Staples Center by the thousands on Tuesday night looking for a little solace in a highball glass, well before the gavel came down. That left Tennessee Rep. Harold Ford, Jr. to soldier through his much-anticipated keynote address, and bring a merciful end to day two of the Democratic National Convention.

Poor Ford. What must he have thought as he saw the assembled multitudes begin streaming out of the hall? He aspired to achieve Mario Cuomo-like heights, circa 1984. Instead, the youngest member of the U.S. House gave the Democratic faithful Michael Dukakis with a hip-hop beat.

Only the starry-eyed stuck it out to the bitter end. Ford did nothing but give a youthful cast to an old message: We must go forward, because we cannot afford to go back. We must look to the horizon, and then we must look beyond it, because we cannot lower our vision and look into ourselves. We must save Social Security for our parents and grandparents. We must include prescription drugs in Medicare, because our seniors shouldn't have to choose between putting food on the table and buying their medicine. We must invest in the public schools, because the children are our future, and if we don't invest in the future, we will slip back to the past. It's up to each and every one of us to create a government close to our heart's desire, because if we don't, someone else will. This isn't about partisanship. This is about making a better tomorrow for all Americans.

Trouble is, if you hear this stuff once, you've heard it a thousand times. At the Democratic National Convention, you hear it two-thousand times. Minimum. After awhile, I stopped writing down what the speakers were saying and began numbering the cliches. Soon after that, I stopped counting.

But one shouldn't be too hard on young Ford. How could he hope to out-do the triumvirate of Jesse Jackson, Ted

Kennedy, and Bill Bradley? How could he say anything that hadn't already been said earlier, and at great length, and with more panache? How could he possibly top a line like, "We can make the world new again, if we try!" or "Stay out of the Bushes!"

That was Jesse Jackson's soundbite for the night. "Look at their team," he said. "Poppa Bush gave us Clarence Thomas." They still haven't gotten over that. "Baby Bush" (that's Gov. Jeb of Florida) ended affirmative action in the universities. And George W. Bush won't stand up for hate crimes laws. "What's the lesson? Stay out the Bushes!" Yes, he dropped the "of."

The Rev. really phoned it in last night. He talked through applause. He tripped over his lines. Even his trademark "Keep hope alive" seemed to lack that old Jacksonian vigor. But even on an off-night, Jesse is a demagogue of the first water.

Officially, Tuesday night was supposed to be about "The Future." But it was almost entirely about the Democratic Party's glorious liberal past. The New Deal. FDR. JFK. RFK. The New Frontier. More JFK. Camelot.

Ah, Camelot! Camelot! There's Jack and Jackie and Bobby and Marilyn and Frank and Sam Giancana. Martin is there, too, somewhere -- just ask J. Edgar, he probably knows. One big, happy roundtable. I know it sounds a bit bizarre, but in Camelot that's how conditions are. The snow may never slush upon the hillside. By 9 a.m. the fog must disappear. In short, there's simply not a more congenial spot for happy everaftering than Camelot!

Or so I've heard. Just one problem: Camelot is a myth.

Maybe somebody should have told Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg. "We are the new frontier," she droned. "We need to ask more of ourselves. We enjoy great prosperity. Now we need a prosperity of kindness and decency. We need to create an America where our parents and grandparents...." And so forth.

After Caroline came her Uncle Ted. He's "Still the One," as the song says, and "we're still havin' fun," mostly at his expense. The distinguished Senator from Massachusetts is a worse speaker than his niece, but at least she has the excuse of not speaking very often. He's been speechifying for years. Used to cause quite a stir, too. Last night, though, he just hollered. And screeched.

But the Staples crowd still loves old Kennedy. He told them what they wanted to hear, namely, that Al Gore will fight and strive and fight some more for universal health care. The faithful got a big kick out of that. What most Americans think of such a scheme is something else again. The idea of universal access to health care for all children, access to prescription drugs for all seniors, and medical decisions made by doctors and nurses rather than accountants has a certain visceral appeal to voters. And not just any health care -- "decent, quality health care."

Who will pay for all this decent, quality health care? Why, the government will. And where will the government get the money? Why, from the surplus! But isn't the surplus supposed to save Social Security, pay down the debt, invest

in the kids, and "pay for" the "right kind of tax cuts"? Well, it's a mighty big surplus. But isn't the federal budget creeping up on \$2 trillion already? Isn't there something you can cut? And what if there's a national emergency?

To quote Ted Kennedy out of context, "That is the unresolved problem. That is the unanswered question."

A word about Bill Bradley, who was the real keynoter of the evening. If you want to know what ails the Democratic Party in 2000, do not bother with the party's platform. Read Bradley's speech. Yes, he endorsed Al Gore. Yes, he put in the good word for the party's efforts in November. He called Al a man of wide-ranging intellect, with a strong sense of loyalty, rooted in religious faith and tolerance. We may give Bradley the benefit of the doubt that he actually believes this. But he never called Gore a good man.

Once Bradley dispensed with the formalities, he got down to business. America may be a prosperous nation, but it is not a compassionate nation. Our fabric is torn by racial strife, he said. The Democratic Party is "not an opponent of the New Age," he said, to some applause. "We are a party of new ideas and new action...a party of hope and a party of change. Don't read our lips. Watch what we do."

Bradley believes that even in the midst of eight years of a prosperous Democratic Golden Age, America is still a cruel and oppressive place. He even invoked the Founding Fathers: "When America's Founders said that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were unalienable rights, they didn't say anything about taking turns." They didn't say anything about federally-subsidized penicillin, free breakfasts, or price-supports for wheat growers, either.

Bradley even had a message for the young people. "Never give up. Never, never sell out. You don't have to give up idealism to be successful in America. On the contrary, you should be outraged."

This is the party of hope? Feh. This is a Camelot of jackasses.

Ben Boychuk is Director of Publications of the Claremont Institute and an editor of the forthcoming Claremont Review of Books. He is jeopardizing his feet, his lower back, and his dubious mental health to file dispatches from the Democratic National Convention this week. Read earlier dispatches on the Claremont Institute's web site at <http://www.claremont.org>.

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