

Lights, camera, action: Democrats in New York

Cable coverage swells, networks cut back

By Steven Alan McGaw

Every four years, competitors from around the world gather to test themselves against each other. Politics and nationalism are inextricable from the event, but the core of the thing, the competition, is relatively pure. The contests are called the Olympics, they're in Barcelona this summer and the world will surely watch with excitement and admiration.

On the same schedule, two separate groups, numbering about 4,000 each, meet in major American cities to test their endurance and shove each other on the floor of a large arena. Politics is the core of the thing, but many windy exhortations are made about the "national interest" and the future of life as we know it. Little about the event is perceived as pure. These two gatherings are the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, and they occur, respectively in New York and Houston. The opportunity exists for the nation to watch, with a likely mixture of curiosity, confusion and ennui.

The Democratic National Convention, the next stepping stone

toward the 1992 presidential election, begins on Monday, July 13, in New York City. Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton is expected to be officially ratified as his party's presidential nominee, but there are many other questions waiting to be answered.

"No, I is definitely, 'who's going to be the vice presidential candidate?'" says Jacquelynne Floyd, a journalist assigned to cover the convention for "The Dallas Morning News." Other issues, Floyd says, include outlining a comprehensible economic plan, how the campaign will appeal to women and younger voters ("a crucial component") and unifying the sometimes-fractious Democratic party itself.

Asked who the key personalities of this convention are likely to be, Floyd mentions Mario Cuomo, Jesse Jackson, and California senatorial hopefuls Diane Feinstein and Barbara Boxer. "But it's hard to say," the journalist admits, adding, "every convention seems to create one new star, like Ann Richards in '88," referring to the now-Texas governor's hilarious "Poor George" speech.

In all, about 15,000 media persons will attend the convention, but television viewers used to watching the Big Three networks may be surprised at the paucity of prime-time coverage. NBC will air one-hour summary of convention activity each night, the rest of the time pooling its resources with those of PBS. The result is an impressive team in the broadcast booth, consisting of Robert MacNeil, Jim Lehrer and Tom Brokaw. While the peacock network is apparently downsizing its coverage, rivals CBS and ABC offer even less: one hour of prime-time coverage nightly, with no second broadcast alternative.

Why the cutbacks? "Politics now is viewed as a bitter medicine," says Floyd. "In the '80s, it was our civic duty. The networks aren't buying that anymore, there are too many other options. If people don't want to swallow the medicine, they'll go somewhere else."

"Somewhere else" could, however, be cable. CNN, under a yearlong banner of "Democracy in Action," promises extensive reporting of the conventions and all election-related activities.

Information junkies will naturally be riveted to C-SPAN's customary gavel-to-gasp coverage.

"We offer our viewers a seat in the convention hall itself," says Steven Scully, C-SPAN's political editor.

CNBC will have representatives at both conventions, as well as its weekly series, "Money Politics: Campaign '92." The Monitor Channel will produce a series of "American Issues '92" specials in association with Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Lifetime calls its "Women and Politics: A Lifetime Challenge" an "election year public awareness program" about issues of particular concern to women. American Movie Classics is busily promoting voter registration through on-air announcements.

One important new player in the field of election coverage is MTV. With its highly touted "Choose or Lose" campaign headed by reporter Tabitha Soren, the music video network has embarked on a vigorous project to bring the election to younger voters.

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