

BRING ON THE CLOWNS (Originally published August 1980)

Ignatius J. Reilly, a brilliant, bloated, outrageous slob is the hero of a recent satirical novel.¹ He is also a movie freak. Ignatius loves bad movies and gets his kicks by going into theaters, spreading out over three seats with four bags of popcorn and suffering loudly while emitting flatulent sounds and scathing comments about almost anything that turns up on the screen. His special hates include directors, producers, set designers, hair stylists, macho heroes and vapid starlets.

There are others of us who derive the same masochistic pleasure in front of a TV screen. Every four years, in particular, we look forward to the national political conventions, those superb media extravaganzas that afford unlimited opportunities for nausea and the critical viewing of TV anchormen, analysts, roving reporters and assorted politicians. The recently completed Republican convention was an unusually gratifying one.

A tip-off to the circus in store was given in a wire service report the day before the convention started; it noted that 6,000 delegates, 4,000 alternates and 12,000 media representatives would be present in Detroit. (The last figure was later amended to 15,000.) Put a microphone in the hand of an eager floor reporter, switch on the camera and he immediately becomes an agitated, insufferably arrogant buffoon. With that many clowns wired for sight and sound milling about the convention hall, something entertaining was bound to happen.

Our daily TV news networks have never been accused of conservative bias or Republican sympathies. Nevertheless, for the first days of the convention (which promised to be a dull one whose outcome, Reagan for President, Bush for Vice President was almost certain) a jovial but uneasy truce existed between the liberal media and the conservative conventioners. A sort of forced impartiality oozed everywhere until the discerning Barbara Walters discovered that a Reagan-Ford ticket was being considered. That set the wheels in motion and energized the clowns. Throughout most of the third day, from a bit of gossip here, a snip of misinformation there and a lot of rarefied conjecture, the reigning media wise men constructed a scenario more to their liking: Bush was out and Ford was in as Reagan's running mate. They even dreamed of a "co-presidency." (At the time, one Reilly-like TV viewer snorted, "I hope the bastards fall flat on their faces and have to eat their words.") By the middle of the delegate roll call late Wednesday night, all three networks had settled the question to their satisfaction, and without equivocation they all waited.

¹ *Confederacy of Dunces*, by John Kennedy Toole.

Something missing here besides cartoons. The next sentence doesn't make sense. IU could word it : Only the appearance of the smiling faces of Reagan and Ford, marching arm in arm down the aisle to the podium, would satisfy them. Only the smiling appearance of Reagan and Ford, marching arm in arm down the aisle to the podium. (By this time, too, the wire services had their stories composed and filed, and the poor Atlanta Constitution sent out its early morning edition with a headline reminiscent of the Truman-Dewey debacle proclaiming, "Ford Accepts Veep Role, If . . .").

Unfortunately, ex-Governor Reagan and ex-President Ford had other ideas, and when a harried, hair-sprayed reporter person blurted out, "It's Bush," the shock waves almost knocked the pundits off their perches. The word merchants had successfully created a media non event. NBC had all along presented the most restrained and balanced convention coverage, and its seasoned duo of Chancellor and Brinkley recovered smoothly, observing that they had been the only ones not to say absolutely that it was Ford, and remembered to congratulate themselves on their 20-second scoop of restoring Bush to the vice presidency spot. It was not so smooth at CBS; Cronkite and Rather, visibly pained and unbelieving, never quite rebounded. They even looked betrayed.

But ABC, with a shaken Frank Reynolds, a wide-eyed Koppel and a glum Barbara Walters, suffered most. Reagan's brief and low-key speech announcing his choice of Bush and giving the reasons for his unscheduled appearance only served to irritate Reynolds who, before leaving the screen, opined with his usual half-concealed smirk that the choice of Bush certainly must have gladdened the heart of Jimmy Carter at Sapelo Island, and that the whole affair was just another example of Ronald Reagan's inability to make up his (sorry) mind. (Frank's own performance should have made his ABC bosses long for the return of Howard K. Smith and Harry Reasoner.)

By the end of the convention's fourth and final anticlimactic day, all of the network teams had regained their composure and wisdom. They had misled no one; they had merely reported information as it had been received and events as they had occurred. They had not been mistaken, the information was. Their infallibility was never in doubt. Wistfully; however, they all agreed that a "dream-ticket" of Reagan and Ford would have had great appeal. It would certainly have appealed to the liberal, anti-Republican media. Think how nicely they could have pontificated on the simplistic Reagan's senility combined with the stumbling Ford's addle-headedness.

So, the Republican convention is over, and the Republican ticket, for the first time in years, may turn out to be a strong one with a balanced and broad base. Probably by the

time this is read, the next convention will also be behind us. But for the time being, with our popcorn bags beside us and Ignatius J. Reilly to inspire us, our little band of TV masochists awaits the Democratic circus and the next appearance of the media clowns.

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