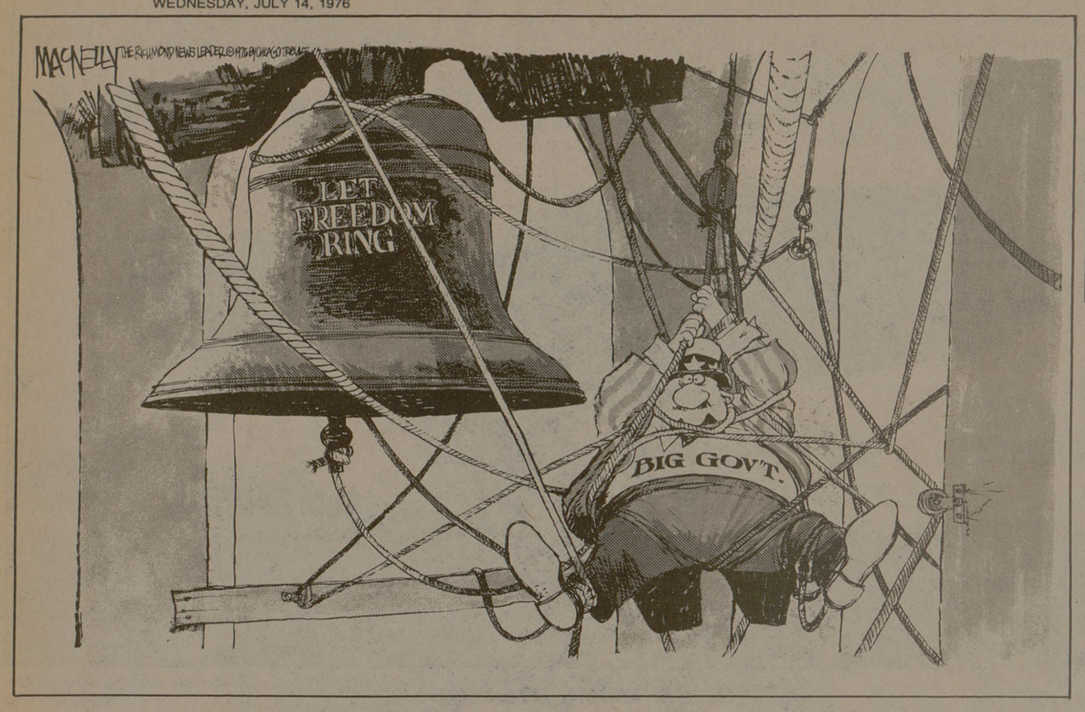
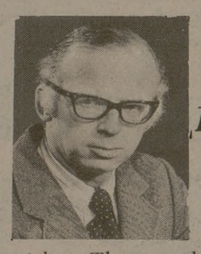


Democratic convention no bore



David S. Broder

NEW YORK — It is an article of faith among the thousands of reporters and spectators gathered here for the Democratic National Convention that it is going to be a dull affair. The nomination has been Jimmy Carter's for more than a month. There are no major fights on platform, rules or credentials, and no prospect of any rebellion against Carter's choice of a running mate.

What a yawn. A prime-time bore.

Baloney. This convention will be boring only to those who judge their regular evening television fare by the number of corpses displayed each half-hour and the ingenuity of the script-writers in arranging for their disposal.

For those here and across the country who have a sense of history and a love of this land and its system of self-government, this has to be a fascinating moment.

The Democratic Party is our oldest political institution, an unbroken link with Jefferson and the Founders, the source of 13 of our Presidents. It is also perhaps the most diverse social institution in this land, embracing within its ranks the grandchildren of slaves and slaveholders, all of the immigrant tribes, the leaders of the academic and artistic and business worlds, of organized and unorganized labor — to say nothing of the majority of all functioning professional and amateur politicians in this republic.

Yet, incredibly, this extraordinary institution exists — like Brigadoon — only four days every fourth year, when its elected delegates meet in a convention hall. Legally and functionally, the national convention *is* the Democratic Party, and nothing else so thoroughly symbolizes the party in the public's mind.

In 1968 and 1972, the Democratic conventions — as seen on television — symbolized violence and discord, riots in the streets and insults in the aisles. The people judged, and rightly so, that a party which could not govern itself was not ready to govern the country.

That will not be the case this year. Any journalist who does not recognize that as a news story of some significance doesn't deserve the assignment here.

Historically, the great function of the national convention was to select the presidential candidate. But since the advent of television, public opinion polls and the presidential primaries, that function has atrophied. The last convention that went beyond one ballot was in 1952, and this year will not break the skein.

In modern times, the real role of the convention has been, not to pick the nominee, but to ratify the choice dictated by the primaries and the polls. But that is no empty gesture, because it is by no means an assured result. A nominee may win his majority in the primaries, but he establishes the legitimacy of his credentials as a presidential contender only in convention hall. The acquiescence of his party must be attained there, or his candidacy in the general election is foredoomed.

If you doubt that, consider the fate of Hubert H. Humphrey in 1968 and George McGovern in 1972, or what happened to Barry Goldwater in the Republican convention of 1964.

The real drama of this convention lies in Jimmy Carter's efforts to be accepted as the *legitimate* leader of the Democratic Party. That drama is heightened, not only because of the disasters tht occurred the last two times the Democrats met, but because of who Jimmy Carter is.

He is the first non-Washington candidate selected to lead the Democrats since they became the party of the national government in 1932. Adlai Stevenson was nominated from the governorship of Illinois, but he was the choice of the incumbent Democratic President, Harry S. Truman, and represented no break in Democratic tradition.

Carter represents a real break with the past. He won primary victories as a critic of the "wasteful, inefficient government" created by the Democrats who have controlled Congress for the past four decades and the White House for most of the time. This convention will offer the first measure of his ability to enlist the willing support of those same congressional Democrats — who have, incidentally, become increasingly resistant to the commands of strong executives in the past eight years.

Carter is also the first real Southerner freely chosen as the Democratic nominee since Civil War days. Lyndon Johnson of Texas had to become President by succession before he could win in convention hall.

In one sense, the Georgian's acceptance by the blacks, who have earned more influence in the Democratic Party than in any other national organization, symbolizes the final healing of the wounds of the Civil War.

But there are still many white Democrats from outside the South — in labor unions, in religious and ethnic groups and in academia — who have not lost their tear of the stereotyped "bigots" of Dixie. Coming to terms with them represents as much of a challenge to Carter as does the latent struggle with those entrenched congressional Democratic powers skeptical of all "outsiders."

Those who cannot see the drama in this testing of wills and this transfer of power are blind to the essential and exquisite workings of our political system. Those who sneer at the convention as tedious or dull might as well sneer at democracy itself.

Without successful conventions, there can be no viable political parties; without viable political parties, there can be no hope of responsible government.

America suffered when the Republicans destroyed themselves in the Cow Palace in 1964, and when the Democrats fragmented in 1968 and 1972. A successful Democratic convention is a piece of work as worthy of watching and cheering as a successful moon-rocket launch. And its effects will be a lot longer-lasting.

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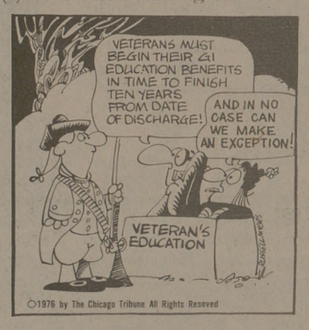

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- Typed triple space
- Limited to 60 characters per line
- Limited to 100 lines

Submit articles to Reed McDonald 217, College Station, Texas, 77843. Author's phone number must accompany all submissions.

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