

Iowa is a great state; the highest literacy rate in the country, very nice people, thoughtful people who make well-reasoned decisions. They can also be difficult to persuade to your side, stubborn, and determined when they're against you. So, in an intra-party fight, Kennedy versus Carter, a lot of them felt that the President, a Democratic President deserves support. And the Carter campaign was pretty effective at rounding up local politicians by using the White House and other levers of power to get the political establishment behind the President. So, it was a tough uphill fight.

If you are a student of conventions, which the most famous speech ever given at a convention, besides Barack Obama's, was William Jennings Bryan in 1896. The 'Cross of Gold' speech. The 'Cross of Gold' speech was actually a speech about a platform plank, one of the sections of the Democratic Party platform, a statement about what do we stand for. Had to do with silver and gold and what the currency was, but the speech took over the convention, inspired the delegates, and caused William Jennings Bryan to be nominated for president by the convention. Kennedy's speech in 1980, if you lay them side by side, they look a lot alike.

I learned they're hard, I learned that you can't assume that because a candidate thinks like you, or talks like you would like them to talk, that they will win. I remember being very relieved that Ronald Reagan, the right-wing ex-Governor, sleepy ex-actor from California had won the nomination because of course he was too right-wing to win. This was a mistake.

In 2004, you know our candidate was John Kerry running his campaign out of Washington, so my role was to be a volunteer in New Hampshire when friends of mine were running the campaign. And at some point, Mary-Beth Cahill, who was running the campaign said to me, "what can you do for us?" And I said I have three kids so I can't do much. I said maybe I could help you with the convention. That's all I said, and I learned that I was in charge of the convention when I heard it on CNN. So, I was in charge of the convention.

Historically, I think it's very tough to get elected president, and it doesn't happen to most people. When it does happen, it's usually because of extraordinary circumstances, which help Barack Obama no question, or a long, building process that persuades a lot of people to be comfortable with the candidate, and that the candidate shares their values and outlook for the country; okay, that's a lot of work. So, a primary process focuses

everyone inward, and it, it slows you down in terms of getting out to the rest of the country that might pay less attention and need more time to learn about a particular candidate. So, what happened prior to, I did an analysis of the media coverage prior to the two conventions in '88, we're running against the Vice President, so you'd think the Vice President [would be] well-known, well he's not that well-known. However, going into this convention, the networks devoted their nightly newscasts to his biography. They focused on his military service, playing baseball at Yale, even his upbringing, which you know, was not necessarily—he had a very privileged upbringing—but you were getting information about him. CIA, Ambassador to China, so they were teaching people his biography. Coverage prior to the convention in Atlanta was all about conflict with Jesse Jackson; two-thirds of it was about that. Jesse Jackson's coming in a bus, we're going to have essentially a race war. And that's not good.

There were a number of efforts in the Democratic party, first—and later in some lesser efforts in the Republican party—to make the conventions more reflective of actual voting and democracy so that the winners of the primaries would be the nominee. Democracy was seen as a kind of good thing in terms of producing a strong nominee; some debate about that. So, the conventions then became important; you have to have a convention to nominate a candidate, by the rules of the party. But therefore that gets you on the ballot in the states. So you have to have the convention, but they became TV, television spectacles. In 1972, the television was mismanaged to the point where George McGovern accepted at 3 AM EST, so no one saw the speech. Terrible. People tried to reform, 1976 was much better, it was a great keynote by a woman named Barbara Jordan who was I think the first African-American woman to give a keynote speech, or a major speech, at a convention. She was brilliant.

Abner Micva, my first boss in politics had said this was the most talented politician he had met in 50 years, so that kind of caught my attention, because you know Abner Micva had worked for Clinton, Adlai Stevenson, Paul Douglas, the whole panoply of Illinois politicians. And so I said maybe I'll check this out. I checked out people I thought would know him, and I called a Harvard Law School Professor by the name of Elena Kagan at the time.

*Off Camera: Doesn't ring a bell...*

And, she said, “he’s great.” And she said it so fast that I was a little impatient with her, and I said “what do you mean he’s great? He’s good on the issues, he’s an issues person?” And she said, “No, I mean he’s really smart, he’s really effective and he really cares.” So I said, “Wow, okay.” So, because of a variety of circumstances, I think because he had already had a fundraiser in Cambridge, he didn’t come back and I didn’t do the fundraiser. But I suggested to Mary-Beth Cahill in February (Illinois has a March primary), “you know, we should really get this guy after he loses that Senate primary next month.”

*Off Camera: and what role did you envision?*

I thought we should recruit him to play a role at a national leadership team, organizing African-Americans, youth. Presidential campaigns, you often assume that they are run by exceptionally competent people with exceptional talent. The truth is they’re usually understaffed and overworked. So you need more help, you don’t want to keep people out, you want to bring people in. So, a talent like this guy, we should bring him in. It was a good idea. I didn’t know he was going to win the primary, so when he won the primary I kind of put that on the back burner and later when I was put in charge of the convention, I started thinking about that.

African-Americans were, not neglected, but they were going to be, we needed to think about it. So, I was thinking about Obama, I had no idea what was going to happen with the vice presidential selection, so Edwards might’ve had a claim on the keynote if he didn’t get picked as VP, because he was an accomplished orator. So in my mind there were a number of possible keynotes: a young woman who had worked for Dukakis came through town and had a cup of coffee with me—Lisa Hay is her name. And we were arguing about Kerry, she was not sufficiently satisfied with Kerry’s positions on the war. And I said, “look get with the program, just do something and give some money.” She said “Alright, but I’ve got to give all my money to my friend Barack.” And I went “Barack, do you know him?” She said, “Yes, I was on the [Harvard] Law Review with him.” I said, “what do you think of him?” She said, “I think he’s great” I said “Really?” She said, “Yeah, you know it’s amazing the time he got elected president of the Law Review.” There’s a banquet, and he gave a speech and all of the waiters, who were African-American, stopped serving to listen to him. So that was a little mental image for me that evoked Mario Cuomo. And I thought, “Aha! This could be good.” And, I thought it might be a pretty good speech, and

he might be a pretty good keynote speaker. I did not think it would be quite as good as it was, I cannot claim credit for that.

I guess it says that you can do well if you give a good speech at the convention. I remember Vicky Rideout said to me “we just elected the first black President.” Right after the speech, Vicky Rideout was our coordinator of speeches and she was very involved in writing it. And I said, “yeah you might be right in 12 years or so.” I’ve underestimated Barack Obama in a couple of key times in his career: the primary in March and then right after the convention. I didn’t expect it to be four years later.

There’s a famous study, a famous book a woman named Kiko Adatto wrote called *The Incredible Shrinking Soundbite*. So, what Professor Adatto showed was that, in 1968 you actually did have something called a “30 second soundbite.” I think it was 27 seconds, but you could get 27 seconds of information. And, by 1988, that had shrunken to 8 seconds; so a candidate on the nightly news would get 8 seconds. I’m pretty sure by 2004 it was down to 3.5 seconds. So you would get a phrase, or a half a sentence. So, communication became less and less informative and more and more symbolic and crude. So I think that’s a function of the commercial pressures of broadcasting. They’ve got to keep the audience interested, they’ve got to keep people tuned in, they’ve got to sell advertising, so the commercial pressures of journalism are hurting journalism’s intellectual quality obviously, and they’re also pushing the coverage towards things that frankly aren’t that illuminating, but might attract attention like a car wreck does. So, it’s all bad is the short answer; the internet and other proliferation of outlets has been interesting, but it’s also led to segmentation in terms of what people see.