

COMMUNITY VOICES

GOP convention grazed issues

By PAUL JEROME CROCE

The word on the street is that the Republican convention was one for the moderates. Florida Gov. Jeb Bush says calmly: That's simply what the Republican Party is.

But if that were the whole story, where were Colin Powell, James Baker and other luminares of moderation in the party?

Before we Americans get too excited about what we saw about President George W. Bush as presented in New York, we ought to get clear not only on what we've seen, but also about what we have not seen.

The convention showed the Republicans to be a party of religious faith and patriotism, free enterprise and pride in the character and compassion of their leader.

Surrogates for the president attacked the Democrats for not being aggressive enough in defending the country against terrorism, and they ridiculed candidate John Kerry for being indecisive. The Republicans did not, however, provide a full account of their values or policies.

The Republican Convention was a setting for quieting attention to what most in the party passionately believe, in hopes of presenting a gentler image that would appeal beyond the party faithful — to centrists and to the electorate as a whole. Fair enough. But that's Republicanism without its heart. Where is the real heart of the Republican Party?

At the convention, there were references to prayer, piety and pro-life commitments, but they were presented without the doctrinal orthodoxy of the religious right and without the non-mainstream creationism and violent

apocalyptic beliefs of many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. Enforcing those beliefs would involve large government involvement in private life. Internationally, such enforcement would endorse a go-it-alone policy for war without end — or at least war until the final Armageddon.

There were references to patriotism, most notably in the recruitment-style videos for the armed services and with delegates frequently chanting "U-S-A." But there was little mention of the wildly hopeful and idealistic expectations of current Defense Department officials that the Middle East could be remade in our image. Nor was there mention of the embarrassing prisoner-abuse scandal trickling down from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Current policy involves tremendous losses and sacrifice, and it is a direct reversal of the Bush 2000 campaign promise to avoid "nation building." Flip-flopping indeed.

There were plenty of references to free enterprise. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger told of deciding to become a Republican in 1968 when he heard Richard Nixon square off against Democratic contender Hubert Humphrey — with the decided implication that progressive Democrats are socialists, like the communists whose shadow he escaped in Cold War Austria.

Yet there was no mention from any speaker regarding Social Security, Medicare, entitlements for the poor, and environmental protection, which have been widely supported by members of both parties (including Nixon). And the current president is using non-legislative means to erode many of these popular pro-

grams in order to avoid congressional debate and public scrutiny. The Republicans talk gleefully of two John Kerrys. What about these two George W. Bushes — the public face of compassion during the campaign season and the not-so-public executive actions of the Bush White House?

There were references to the character and compassion of George W. Bush, but certainly without any acknowledgment of his limited experience and knowledge, especially in international relations. And yet those limits, with all his vaunted decisiveness, contributed to his decisions to take risks and spurn allies in ways that more informed and prudent people would not dream of doing. There is an almost gambler-style impulsiveness in the president that was in no way conveyed by the gauzy images of the convention.

The convention dusted off the "compassionate conservatism" that George W. Bush has made little reference to since the last campaign. Meanwhile, the average convention viewer would have little basis for understanding the religious and ideological base of the party.

The Republicans and the president have the right to their policy positions and beliefs, and to hold a convention designed to put those positions in the best possible light. (Their positions are very tough-minded, and they have chosen to present them in a sentimental light.) The public also has the right to a fuller picture before making a decision in November. And the media has a duty to tell that story.

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