

The Forum

Do conventions still rate big TV coverage?

Yes

By Tom Johnson

Every four years, voters in the United States engage in a political-selection process that determines the direction of this nation's domestic and international policies.

As we approach the opening of the two national political conventions, a fall campaign and the November elections, it is important to remember what is at stake.

The leader chosen has the power to launch nuclear weapons, as President Truman did against Japan in World War II. This leader has the authority to convene summit meetings to try to secure peaceful resolutions of conflicts, as President Carter did with his Camp David summit with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel, and as President Clinton did during these past three weeks with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

This leader also has the authority to dispatch hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops to distant lands in efforts to combat aggression, as President Bush and the coalition allies did so successfully in the Persian Gulf, and as President Johnson did at a cost of such a huge loss of life in Vietnam.

Beyond making decisions that influence war and peace, this leader selects the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board and the secretary of the Treasury — leaders who shape U.S. economic policies. Presidents are instrumental in raising or cutting taxes; spending your tax money, or returning it to you; and deciding where it is spent.

In the next four years, a new president may reshape the direction of the U.S. Supreme Court, with profound implications on such controversial issues as abortion rights.

For the experts, all of this is so fundamental that it sounds like basic grade-school material. Yet it serves as a reminder that few moments in American life are as important. For this reason, it is the responsibility of our country's media organizations to provide comprehensive coverage.

Why? Simply because we either should operate in the public interest or risk losing the respect of those we serve: the American public and those outside the United States who are interested in who

will be chosen to lead this influential global superpower.

CNN will deploy more than 400 journalists and support staff to the Philadelphia and Los Angeles conventions. This is a significant investment of time, talent and money. Despite predictions of modest audience levels, we will provide live coverage, plus dozens of special reports and 15 programs, airing directly from the conventions.

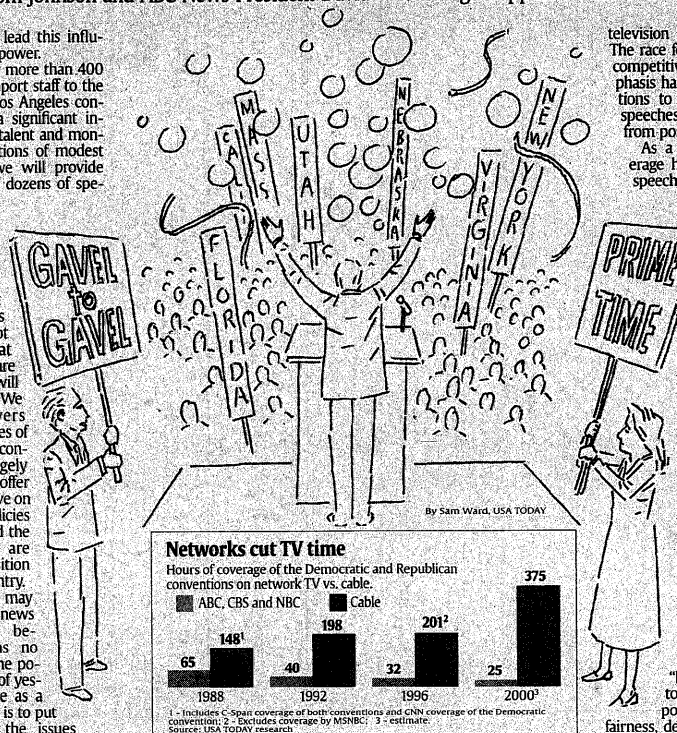
The common criticism that has been raised about the conventions is that they are not newsworthy, that the proceedings are highly staged and will bore the viewers. We think the viewers should be the judges of that. Even if the conventions are largely contrived, they offer valuable perspective on the parties, the policies they represent and the candidates who are pursuing the position of CEO of this country.

So while there may not be any major news developments — because conventions no longer resemble the political free-for-alls of yesteryear — our role as a news organization is to put the conventions, the issues and the candidates into context for the voters.

At the 1988 Democratic National Convention, the little-known governor of Arkansas stepped into the national spotlight with his nominating speech for Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis, who emerged from the week with a 17-point lead in the polls over then-vice president George Bush.

This year, when Laura Bush, whose father-in-law was unseated by Bill Clinton eight years ago, addresses the convention, CNN will be there. When Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and retired general Colin

Starting in 1948, the TV networks provided gavel-to-gavel coverage of political conventions. But that began to change in 1968: in part because of the fiasco at the Democratic convention in Chicago, in part because Democrats instituted new rules that changed the presidential-selection process from conventions to primaries, in part because ABC decided to cut back its coverage. This year, the networks' coverage will be at its lowest ever: about 25 hours. Still with four cable outlets and the Fox News Channel planning virtual gavel-to-gavel coverage, there will be more coverage than ever. Which is the proper tack to take? CNN Chairman Tom Johnson and ABC News President David Westin argue opposite views.



Powell take their turns at the podium, CNN will carry their words to more than 200 nations and territories around the world. And CNN will be there when the president gives his farewell speech from the national stage on Aug. 14, the opening night of the Democratic National Convention.

We will be there to cover our national democratic franchise. It is our duty and our privilege. But above all, as journalists, it is our job.

Tom Johnson is chairman and CEO of CNN.

television is trying to catch up. The race for the presidency is as competitive as ever, but the emphasis has shifted from conventions to primaries; from long speeches to short TV spots; from position papers to "spin."

As a result, television coverage has had to move from speeches to meaning. We owe a civic duty to make the conventions as clear to voters as possible. We also compete to be the best in political coverage. That's why some of our best and brightest people cover politics on all of our outlets, from TV to radio, to the Internet. We focus on breaking news and in-depth analysis.

What are the issues? How much emphasis do we put on the horse race? What polling should we do? How do we make sure that, when there is anything important or interesting to say, we say it first and better?

This year, though, some want to change what it means to be the "best." Rather than look to the quality of the reporting — its accuracy,

fairness, depth and perspective — they want us to measure political reporting by one factor alone: who spends the most time. Two hours' coverage of a convention automatically is better than one: gavel-to-gavel coverage is better still.

Not coincidentally, this push to weigh political coverage by the ton comes at a time of great competition among the 24-hour cable news outlets. If they can get everyone to believe that hours on the air are more important than substance, they stand to "win" the competition they've set up.

The broadcast networks will never be in a position to give over

as much time to the conventions as cable news channels are. Period. Game, set and match to them.

The truth, of course, is more complicated. The "best" convention coverage depends on what you're trying to achieve and with whom you're competing.

Broadcast networks such as ABC have as their mission reaching the broadest audience possible. This is good business. But when it comes to public events such as presidential elections, it's also in the public interest. That's why ABC arranged for the National Football League to move its Monday night games on the first nights of the two conventions to an earlier starting time, giving ABC News the opportunity to cover potentially important speeches scheduled for the late evening.

That is why, frankly, ABC News is covering the conventions in prime time — not because it is the most popular programming, but because we regard it as an obligation to our audience.

If our civic duty is to seek to reach millions of Americans who will not otherwise watch hour after hour of the conventions, programming in shorter, more condensed (and, yes, more watchable) blocks is not an option. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the very length of gavel-to-gavel coverage argues against its being watched by most Americans.

Limiting network coverage to an hour or two each night makes it easier for people to make the commitment to watch and still get the information they need. It is a necessity. It also gives our team of expert anchors and reporters the opportunity to prepare what they want to cover — to think about what is happening, rather than just go with it live on the air.

Don't get me wrong. There is a place for covering the conventions from morning to night. ABC News itself is providing gavel-to-gavel coverage on ABC News Radio and on ABCNews.com.

But to say that a relatively small minority of the country wants and deserves round-the-clock coverage of political conventions is one thing. It is quite another thing — and quite wrong — to go further and suggest that our much larger audience is less worthy and less well served when it chooses insightful, well-edited and condensed coverage.

David Westin is president of ABC News.

No

By David Westin

David Brinkley, at one of the many conventions he anchored, commented that the third nominating speech for a vice presidential candidate was "driving them away." He meant voters — but he also meant viewers.

In the past 50 years, as politics and television have grown so intertwined, politics has changed, while

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