

Picking a President

By Mel Lavine

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If it comes down to it – and there is an open convention and it comes down to a floor fight for the G.O.P. nomination – don't despair. The turmoil may be good for what ails us. For the first time in a generation a major party's nomination would be decided at their national convention rather than in primaries and caucuses. We'd likely see a political drama play out as of old – as a brawl rather than a coronation.

At this writing (the day of the Illinois primary) the race is still Mitt Romney's to lose. He has 495 of the 1,144 delegates needed for the nomination. He may still make it before the last primary in Utah on June 26. But before Illinois, Rick Santorum had 252 delegates, Newt Gingrich 131 and Ron Paul 48. But it has remained a challenge for Romney to capture the souls of conservatives and put the Santorum challenge to rest.

The party's last convention-floor fight was between Ronald Reagan and President Gerald Ford in 1976. (Ford survived the challenge but the clash hurt. Ford lost by only 2 percentage points to Jimmy Carter in the general election. Four years later Carter had to fight off a challenge from Senator Edward (Ted) Kennedy. That clash contributed to his defeat in 1980 to a resurgent Reagan.

We learn the Republican officials are "bracing" for the possibility of a pre-nomination battle between the party's establishment (which favors Romney) and the Tea Party movement (which favors the more conservative Santorum and Gingrich, if not Ron Paul). According to the New York Times "the Republican National Committee has alerted the Committee on Contests to be ready for action..." before the convention is called to order at Tampa in August.

I'm old enough to remember the conventions on the radio. Alabama was memorable because it came first in the alphabetical roll call of the states. "Mr. Chairman," the leader of the delegation cried out, "Al-ah-BAMA, the Heart of Dixie, the Yellowhammer state, home of the Long Pine Tree, the beautiful camellia," or something close to it, keeping the country in suspense before telling us the vote.

Many of the states did the same, seizing the limelight to promote the splendors of back home. Often a delegate jumps up to address the convention. At length, the official in charge signifies, "The chair recognizes the senator, governor, representative, or whomever and for whatever purpose. ..."

I'm sure the legendary smoke-filled room played a role in these proceedings, where the party elders gathered to make a president. This is less true today since primaries are considered a more democratic way to go about the business. But I remember Walter Cronkite once saying that the smoke-filled room had its faults, but, on balance, it worked pretty well. The party elders knew the candidates, knew their secrets, their skeletons, their strengths and weaknesses, and by and large the country fared O.K. No doubt this is a subject worth pursuing in another column or two.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.