

The Shadow Conventions

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When the major political parties hold their presidential conventions, they, in essence, place a sign on their backs that says, "Kick me." The media complains the conventions are highly scripted, no-news, gabfest-coronations — except for the moment the veep selection is unveiled or leaked. (Such gripes are, of course, accurate. But if the conventions offered long, in-depth, primetime debates over policy issues — say, the US relationship with the World Trade Organization — it's doubtful the broadcast networks would be eager to shove aside their game shows and desert-island soap operas for such fare.) And while the media moans, various advocacy groups often stage press conferences or protests to criticize the party or its nominee, hoping to attract a few of the gazillion journalists present who desperately need to fill inches or airtime.

This election year, a collection of public interest groups are trying to rise above the usual low-level and less-than-organized sniping by mounting what they bill as the Shadow Conventions at the Republican gathering in Philadelphia and the Democratic get-together in Los Angeles. For four hours each day, while the deep-pocket funders, delegates, and pols are recovering from the previous night of speechifying and parties, the Shadowers will discuss issues MIA at the main events: campaign finance reform; poverty and the increasing gap between rich and poor in America; and the failure and awful consequences of the war on drugs.

Big-name talent has been recruited. Senator John McCain is scheduled to speak at the opening Shadow session on the night of Sunday, July 30, as his fellow Republicans assemble in Philadelphia. Presumably, he will earnestly lash both parties for being polluted by special-interest money. (Then two nights later, he will stride to the podium inside the GOP convention, praise George W. Bush, who has broken records in campaign fundraising, and urge the Republican Party, with its soft-money-filled coffers, on to victory.) Senator Russell Feingold, a Democrat who has teamed up with McCain to press for reform legislation, is slated to show at the opening night of the LA alternative convention two weeks later. Jesse Jackson, Senator Paul Wellstone, Warren Beatty (who flirted with a progressive run for the presidency last year), Green party presidential candidate Ralph Nader, and Representatives John Lewis, Jesse Jackson Jr., Dennis Kucinich, and Jerrold Nadler (all Democrats) have committed to appearing. So have a few prominent GOPers beyond McCain. New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson and Representative Tom Campbell, who is running for Senate in California, are on the bill. Both are Republicans who have assailed the draconian war on drugs and proposed that get-tough drug

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enforcement be throttled back, while drug treatment is revved up. (The conveners plan to try to corral conservative columnist William Buckley and former secretary of State George Shultz, who each have criticized the war on drugs.)

At the center of the Shadow Conventions (www.shadowconventions.com) is Arianna Huffington. Some might recall her standing by her California Republican husband Michael (now her ex), as he spent a record \$5.4 million in 1992 to buy a seat in Congress and then spent \$30 million — another record at the time — losing a Senate bid in 1994 to Dianne Feinstein. Or she might be remembered for being a Newt cheerleader in the early days of the so-called Republican revolution, when she also served as a conservative pundit. But as she saw more of Gingrich — who claimed he was interested in her ideas about combatting poverty — she was repulsed. “I was completely fooled,” she now concedes. She became a Gingrich foe and a passionate declaimer of a thoroughly corrupted political system that is, in her words, “under the thumb of a small corporate elite” that uses “its financial clout to control both parties’ political agendas.” She came to realize a fundamental truth: Why does this political system not place ending poverty at the top of its to-do list? Because the poor have no money to contribute to the politicians.

In her recent book, *How to Overthrow the Government*, Huffington served up a Naderesque critique — “American politics is broken” — and called for the public financing of elections, Seattle-like protests, more civic activism, and a boycott of corporations that do not donate to people in need. Besides blabbing and writing about the dire condition of representative democracy in America, she has done the grunt work, collaborating with various public interest groups — Mass Voters for Clean Elections, the Nader-founded Oaks Project in California, the anti-poverty, church-based Call to Renewal — to help them gain attention and support. After years on the right, she has become a neo-progressive. “I’m a recovering Republican,” she says with a chuckle. “I’m trying to atone for spending all that money in 1994.” To follow-up on her book and her recent activism, Huffington decided to concoct an alternative to the conventions.

She drew up a budget of \$500,000, raised several hundred thousand dollars from foundations — including billionaire George Soros’ Open Society Institute — and enlisted good-works outfits as conveners. Their leaders tend to eschew the term “left,” but they hail from progressive fields. Common Cause lobbies for campaign reform such as a ban on soft-money contributions (those large, unrestricted loophole-donations from corporations, millionaires, and unions). Public Campaign promotes clean-money laws that provide full public financing to candidates. United for a Fair Economy was formed by activists from the labor, civil rights, women’s and anti-poverty movements to highlight the growing gap between rich and poor in America; it urges shifting the tax burden back to the well-off. (Danny Glover and Harry Belafonte have helped the group.) The National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support calls for increasing the minimum wage so it can support a working family, ending workfare, and creating public jobs programs in areas of concentrated poverty. The Call to Renewal advocates a national anti-poverty program that would include a living wage, government subsidies for child care, and health insurance for all. The Lindesmith Center pushes alternative drug policies, such as ending mandatory minimums, expanding drug treatment, restricting the use of assets forfeiture, and permitting the medical use of marijuana. These groups, which are responsible for most of the content of the Shadow Conventions, hired Mike Dolan, a key organizer of the anti-WTO activity in Seattle last year, to

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pull together Huffington's policy-and-politics parties.

At a recent press conference at Common Cause HQ in Washington, Jim Wallis of the Call to Renewal explained the mission: "It's a real simple question. Who's on the agenda and who's not. I hear candidates talk a lot about Soccer Mom." But, he added, someone else is being left out of the picture. At a Burger King not too long ago, Wallis noticed that a woman working the drive-in window was rushing back and forth to several kids seated in a corner booth. She was, he learned, helping her children with their homework. Someone like that, he noted, "is put forward as a success story of welfare reform and there's nothing else to do for her. Burger King Mom and her kids are not on the agenda in this election so far. One out of five kids are still in poverty."

Other convenors pointed to troubling societal markers that will grab no attention at the conventions. Two hot-growth industries these days, United for a Fair Economy's Chuck Collins observed, are prison construction and gated residential communities. Ethan Nadelmann, the director of the Lindesmith Center, noted that in 1980 50,000 people were in prisons for drug law violations; today it is almost half a million — which is more than the entire prison population of Europe. "We want to focus on the people who have suffered," Huffington said, "like this ten-year-old child whose mother is in jail for life on a non-violent drug offense."

Huffington is trying to push the Shadow Conventions beyond the confines of all-policy-all-the-time. That's no surprise. In 1996, she and comedian Al Franken provided commentary on both conventions to cable television's Comedy Central. (They presented their reports while sharing a bed on screen.) Now she has lined up her comic friends — Franken, Saturday Night Live and Spinal Tap alum Harry Shearer, and Politically Incorrect's Bill Maher — to bring their styings to her conventions. And when the party conventions are underway at night, veteran comedy writers will annotate the proceedings with satirical subtitles on a real-time video feed that will be shown in the Shadow venues and perhaps broadcast over the Internet. Rock the Vote has been assigned the task of rounding up star-power musicians, who can draw notice to the festivities. (Any chance McCain will share the stage with Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails?) The Shadow Conventions may preview excerpts of a new Michael Douglas film related to the war on drugs. Lewis Lapham, the wry editor of Harper's, is set to lecture on satire as a political tool.

Huffington's assemblies are ambitious projects that will be occurring while others are waging street protests. Veterans of the demonstrations at Seattle and the World Bank are drawing up plans for repeats in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. In Los Angeles, the activists hope to mount a convention of homeless, a march on the opening day of the convention, and an anarchists' conference. In Philadelphia, plans call for marches for economic human rights and for death-row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal, as well as a direct-action attempt at disrupting the GOP convention. A July 30 demonstration there has been endorsed by various unions, NOW, the NAACP, church groups, and gay rights advocates. These events — unless they turn nasty or surprisingly large — are not the sort of activity that draws the mainstream press.

Huffington — media-savvy as she is — has knit together two confabs that have the potential of competing with the acts in the center ring. (The organizers of the Shadow Convention are

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hoping C-SPAN will air the proceedings.) After all, it's not often that an event brings together Ralph Nader and a Republican governor to lambaste the established order, albeit different portions of the established order. Perhaps Huffington, who's always been a whiz at winning attention for herself and her causes, has hit on a formula — in-your-face policy challenges, edgy satire, and celebrity — that will prompt some media and some citizens (maybe even some politicians?) to pay heed to matters locked out of the balloon-filled conventions.

The Shadowers' aims are not conventional politics. They are not out to influence the party platforms or affect the veep picks. They merely want to cast light into the darker corners that are ignored during the hoopla and high-donor fundraisers. By the way, the Democratic and Republican nominees have not been invited to the Shadow Conventions. "Well," Huffington says, "they have their own forums."