

The Republican convention

The maverick and the hockey mom

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Republicans are more fired up than before, but less so than Democrats



BEFORE Barack Obama's big open-air speech in Denver last week, some Christian conservatives prayed for rain. That was in poor taste. But this is a competitive election, and anything the right can do, the left can do better. When the news came that a hurricane might strike New Orleans during the Republican convention in St Paul, Minnesota this week, Michael Moore, a film-maker, said it was "proof that there is a God in heaven". Another calamitous storm, you see, would remind people how ineptly George Bush dealt with Hurricane Katrina three years ago and spur them to vote Democratic.

The first day of the convention, September 1st, was all but cancelled—though, in the end, the hurricane was less destructive than had been feared (see [article](#)). That left three days for Republicans to achieve three

goals. They needed to distance John McCain from Mr Bush, to introduce Sarah Palin (Mr McCain's surprise vice-presidential pick) to voters and to denigrate Mr Obama. Strangely, Hurricane Gustav may have helped. The storm gave Mr Bush a good reason to stay away on the first day. During a brief video link-up, he generously stressed the times Mr McCain has disagreed with him.



To boost their nominee, Republicans played all the familiar tunes. Videos hinted at parallels with previous presidents: Teddy Roosevelt, the war hero, and Ronald Reagan, who faced down the Soviet Union. Fred Thompson, a gravel-voiced actor, former senator and unsuccessful presidential candidate, praised Mr McCain's courage during two years of solitary confinement where the heat caused "boils the size of baseballs under his arms". "It's pretty clear," said Mr Thompson, that "there are two questions we will never have to ask ourselves: 'Who is this man?' and 'Can we trust this man with the presidency?'"

The highlight of the first full day was an independent Democrat who got the crowd cheering for Bill Clinton, of all people. Joe Lieberman, who was Al Gore's running-mate in 2000, listed what happened when Mr Clinton stood up to his own party's interest groups and worked with a Republican Congress: welfare reform, free-trade agreements and balanced budgets. Mr Obama, by contrast, "has not reached across party lines to get anything significant done". John McCain had done it "over and over again", said Mr Lieberman, citing his friend's struggles with his own party over campaign-finance and immigration reform. This speech provoked howls of "traitor" from Democratic bloggers, but cheers from the floor.

The week's biggest buzz surrounded Mr McCain's little-known running-mate. Delegates waxed ecstatic about Mrs Palin, the governor of Alaska. Social conservatives, who have reservations about Mr McCain, immediately sensed that she is one of them. Christians applauded her piety, gun-lovers her love of guns and pro-lifers the Down's syndrome baby she calls "perfect". And nearly everyone warmed to her moose-

skinning authenticity. "I give her extreme credit for being a mother of five and a governor. I'm a mother of five. And I can barely keep milk in the house," said Kelley McDonald of New Jersey.

All week Democrats hammered Mrs Palin for her lack of experience of national or international politics. Republicans retorted that, as a governor and former mayor, she has more executive experience than Mr Obama and Joe Biden combined. Speaker after speaker contrasted Mr Obama's record of rubbing along with machine politicians in Chicago with Mrs Palin's record of confronting corruption within her own party. But everyone knew that picking her was a risk. "You're not a [bomber] pilot if you don't take risks," said Mike Huebsch, the Republican speaker of the Wisconsin assembly.

On September 3rd the "hottest VP from the coolest state," as the badges put it, took the stage. She seemed a trifle nervous and unsure of the teleprompter. But the audience loved her. She spoke of her union-member, snowmobile-champion husband and her five children, including one who is about to deploy to Iraq.

She accused Democrats of looking down on small-town mayors. "Let me explain to them what the job involves," she said. "I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a community organiser, except that you have actual responsibilities." She boasted of vetoing half a billion dollars in wasteful spending as governor and selling the former governor's jet on eBay. There was much to admire about Mr Obama, but she chided him for having written "two memoirs but not a single major law".

Since voters say they care most about energy, and since she governs an oil state, she spoke about it at length. She scoffed at Democrats who oppose drilling for oil on the ground that it won't solve all America's energy problems—"as if we didn't know that already"—and promised to promote nuclear, solar, wind, geothermal energy and clean coal, too. The crowd chanted "Drill, baby, drill!"

The Economist went to press before Mr McCain's speech on September 4th. Both he and Mr Obama say they want to unite their country, but their two parties' conventions showed a gaping cultural gulf. In Denver abortion-rights advocates handed out condoms with the logo "Protect yourself from John McCain", while Obamaphiles wore badges that substituted "Obama" for "God" in the motto "In God We Trust". Evangelicals in St Paul sighed that secular Democrats probably did not realise how offensive this was.

Outside the Republican convention, largely peaceful protests were marred by a few thugs who smashed windows. More violent disruptions were avoided, however, because police informants infiltrated a gang of anarchists who were allegedly planning them. Police seized weapons and

buckets of urine, apparently intended for throwing at people. Lawyers for some of those arrested demanded the return of their possessions. "Who should we return the urine to?" asked the judge, according to the *Star-Tribune*, a local paper.