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## **`Catastrophic success'? Don't laugh too soon**

BY JIM WRIGHT  
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(KRT) - Never say we politicians can't take a joke on ourselves. Democrats, in convention assembled, wanted to show we're just as strong on family values as the Republicans. To prove it, our first night out, we featured Bill Clinton.

Not to be outdone, the GOP was determined to get rid of its coldhearted image. It designated an evening to display its compassionate side. Featured speaker: The Terminator!

California's Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger fell right into the spirit of things. He told how he became a Republican. It was 1968. The Terminator couldn't understand much English yet. He took one good look at Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey and GOP standard-bearer Richard Nixon, he explains, and decided he wanted to be like Nixon.

A preacher friend, Barry Bailey - also a Democrat - makes a strong point against locker-room language. If Claytie Williams hadn't told off-color stories to the press when running for Texas governor in 1990, Bailey reasons, Williams would have been elected. With a Republican in that office, George W. Bush wouldn't have run in '94.

"So just think: Whatever troubles we have," Bailey concludes, "are Claytie Williams' fault!"

The point, if there is one: We might as well laugh at ourselves - it's better than crying.

American political campaigns have grown more distant, less personal, more money-driven. Canned third-party TV commercials are more negative, more confrontational, sometimes flagrantly dishonest.

There are, of course, brutally serious implications. Schwarzenegger insisted at one point that anyone desiring to subdue terror has to be a Republican!

Wednesday's fare grew meaner. Maverick Democrat Zell Miller slashed away bitterly at Sen. John Kerry, painting him as soft on terrorists. Saddam Hussein drew frequent mention - as though he, not Osama bin Laden, had fomented the 9-11 atrocities.

Miller's attitude disturbed not only Democrats but others like veteran newsman Jack Germond, who reminded viewers that the war on terror and the war against Iraq are two separate things. They even could have disturbingly different outcomes.

President Bush may have revealed a moment of philosophical depth last Monday when he was quoted as saying he wasn't sure we'd ever totally win the war on terror.

Political consultants gasped. Hawkish ideologues muttered protests. Next morning, the now familiar rote of simplistic triumphalism reappeared. The president buoyantly assured the American Legion convention that "we will win" the war on terror!

Philosopher silenced, cheerleader reinstated - but not before another verbal curiosity had escaped the president's lips. Our military attack on Iraq, Bush assured listeners on Monday, had been a "catastrophic success!"

Think on that phrase. Please don't dismiss it as an oxymoron.

History tells of catastrophic victories. Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Russia seemed, at first, phenomenally successful. Horizon after vast horizon of gaping real estate, inadequately defended, fell before France's invading army.

Then came winter. Catastrophe dogged the slogging steps of freezing, hungry, disheveled and demoralized warriors who, hounded and harassed by angry villagers, straggled back along the seemingly interminable path of their invasion, now their route of retreat.

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor - judged solely by the cold logic of demonic destruction - was brilliant. Tactically successful. But it awakened a sleeping giant. For Japan, it ultimately was catastrophic.

As we listened this past week to the self-assured and unquestioning recitations - always on message - that lifted spirits and roused enthusiasm among GOP delegates in New York, another moment of history intruded on my mind.

Some 800 years ago, Richard I came to power in England. He was, in self-assurance and positive manner, heroic. Future bards would dub him "the Lionhearted." Beside French and German kings, he led what history calls the Third Crusade.

For England, it was a terribly costly venture, in lives and money, but arguably successful. In the end, a truce with the Muslim leader Saladin did not cede back any of the ground that Arabs and Turks had occupied for more than a century, but

it did provide safe passage for Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land and shrines.

Richard returned to find the economy in disarray, the royal treasury exhausted. He had to impose harsh new levies on his war-weary people. And intermittent wars continued for 300 years after that! His victory, though exalted in knighthood, might be described as a catastrophic one.

This election could cast long shadows into America's future. The stakes include jobs, health, education, national solvency and individual freedoms.

So think, and then vote.

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