

Bloggers, Bigwigs and the Democratic Future

By Dan Abbott

Dispatch from Vegas

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I woke up Sunday afternoon in the middle of the desert, and realized I was driving. The sun was blazing, and the speedometer read 85. My assistant Ben was sleeping peacefully in the passenger seat, and I felt pangs of jealousy poke holes in my exhaustion and horror.

We had worn ourselves out over the weekend at the Yearly Kos convention in Las Vegas, a gathering of the Internet-savvy wing of the Democratic Party. Bloggers, techies, activists, and no small number of political hopefuls gathered at the Riviera Hotel and Casino in hopes of utilizing the Internet grassroots, or "netroots," to infuse new life into a minority party that has since Sept. 11, 2001 wavered between cautious obedience and craven bootlicking.

Because my aunt, Gina Cooper, was one of the event's organizers, this reporter from a humble hometown paper scored a press pass for the weekend. I had spent the previous week covering the race for Alameda County's District 3 Supervisor, a race incumbent Alice Lai-Bitker currently leads. The balloons, free food, and lack of sleep were an appetizer for the power buffet I experienced in Vegas.

The morning after the election, I typed up my election coverage and set out for Vegas. With the ghost of Hunter S. Thompson billowing behind me, I shook off the fatigue and chugged foul-tasting cans of caffeine and sugar, blazing down the road in pursuit of the future of democracy.

For the diverse group of politically active Internet junkies that organize around DailyKos.com, the Yearly Kos convention was vindication that major-league politicians have begun to take notice of their online influence. Several national political figures spoke at the convention, including California Sen. Barbara Boxer, who acknowledged that the Internet has created the potential for the Democratic Party to get its act together.

"We have a whole new compo-

nent in America today," Boxer told a crowd of nearly 1,000 bloggers. "We have awakened a sleeping giant."

Every politician knows how to play to their audience, and the major-league Democrats in attendance all echoed similar ego-gratifying statements. Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, and presidential hopeful Gen. Wesley Clark all praised the power of the Internet to shore up a democratic process that has in recent years begun to look more like a livestock auction. But these men and women are some of the best orators in the business, and for them to be pouring it on so thickly to an assortment of rather ordinary-looking Americans from all walks of life marks a serious political sea change.

"You are being heard," Boxer told the audience. "People in Washington are reading your blogs."

Misty-eyed standing ovations were the order of the day, a victorious moment for an online community both obsessed with politics and infuriated by their perceived lack of voice in the process. But they don't want to simply replace the politicians. The Yearly Kos crowd wants to reshape the Democratic Party, and American politics itself.

"You are the vanguard of real change," Dean told an electrified crowd. "This is the handoff from the boomer generation to the millennials."

That's not to say that traditional

politics is dead. In the top of the 1,149-foot Stratosphere tower, a flying-saucer shaped banquet room, Virginia Gov. Mark Warner held a lavish party that convention sources said cost between \$150,000 and \$200,000. Rock-stars and cartoonists mingled by the open (and generous) bar, and guests dipped strawberries and marshmallows into an enormous fountain of liquid chocolate. Warner, testing the waters for a 2008 presidential run, kept the speeches to a minimum, but not before pulling DailyKos.com founder Markos Moulitsas Zuniga before the crowd for an endorsement. Zuniga, a Berkeley resident known online simply as Kos, gave a tepid endorsement of Warner, telling the audience to make sure Warner lives up to his promises before voting for him.

"I haven't decided about Warner yet," he told the audience. "But the fact that he's here is encouraging." It seemed shockingly forthright until I remembered that Warner was feeding off Kos' event, and Kos isn't asking for votes, just voters.

Unfazed, Warner warmly embraced the virtual community Kos has created, hoping they will return the favor.

"I don't think bloggers are a fluke," he told the crowd as a Blues Brothers cover band moved into place behind him. "This is the new face of the village square. This is the new face of the Democratic Party."

There was a certain kind of irony in platitudes about digital populism being spoken in the tallest tower west of the Mississippi. It was an irony buried under an avalanche of margaritas and delicious hors d'oeuvres. But that is perhaps more because politicians are reacting to a new political force with old approaches. It may take years before they can adapt their responses to digital democracy in a way that doesn't remind you of the millions of people still left outside the tower.

Contact Dan Abbott at dabbott@alamedasun.com

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