

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Democratic elites size up Jesse Jackson

Jesse Jackson's highly publicized powwow with the power elites of the Democratic Party here March 30 was set up to evaluate whether or not he will calmly step aside and support a Democratic ticket that excludes him, or whether he is determined to wreck the party with an ugly fight to force his way onto the ticket at the party convention in July.

The party aristocracy is fully aware of the capacity for Jackson to wreck their chances to win the White House in 1988 and instead send them down to another epic defeat. He could achieve this either by forcing his way onto the ticket as a presidential or vice presidential candidate based on the delegates to the convention that he accumulates during the primaries, or by raising such a ruckus at the convention in demanding a slot on the ticket that he splits the party hopelessly apart.

The top levels of the party have good reason to suspect that this may be Jackson's mission. It would serve both the intelligence networks that have backed him (in the interests of a Bush presidency) and the longer-term Jackson agenda which includes nurturing the neo-fascist Black Islam movement of Louis Farrakhan.

The Democratic party hierarchy, therefore, is desperate to find a way to stop Jackson, especially since his sweeping victory in the Michigan caucuses. The first overt move in this direction by Democratic National Chairman Paul Kirk backfired badly. This took place after Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.) won the Illinois primary March 15, making it almost certain that no single Democratic candidate would

accumulate enough delegates in the primaries to be able to clinch the nomination on the first ballot at the July 18-21 convention in Atlanta.

Kirk proposed that a meeting of power brokers be held in a proverbial "smoke-filled room" to pick the ticket before the convention. He proposed this, he said, to avoid the danger that the convention could disintegrate into a brawl if the nominee were not cleanly elected on the first ballot. But Kirk's suggestion led to a violent reaction within the party's grassroots.

As a result, Kirk has since virtually disappeared, and the more sophisticated and experienced among the party elders have taken over the handling of the operation with greater care. They carried out three operations to restore confidence among the rank-and-file, while at the same time trying to contain Jackson.

First, they arranged to have Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) endorse Gov. Mike Dukakis of Massachusetts. Since Bradley's name was one of those most often evoked as a "draft" candidate at a brokered convention, his move to endorse Dukakis was designed as a signal that the party would settle for selecting its candidate from among those now running in the primaries. It was aimed at soothing the troubled waters Kirk's proposal had churned up.

In fact, the plan was to have Gov. Mario Cuomo of New York—the man most prominently mentioned as a draft candidate for the nomination—also endorse Dukakis for the same reason. This was slated to occur just after the Michigan caucuses, but had to be postponed because of the smashing Jackson victory there.

Second, the party elites moved to stop Jackson during the primaries themselves, rather than by clumsy and self-destructive power plays by the party leadership. Thus, they set young

Sen. Albert Gore (D-Tenn.) the task of beginning to launch heavy attacks on Jackson in the campaign.

Until this, Jackson had been immune from serious attack, because the other candidates feared it would create a racist impression. The media also categorically refused to say anything negative about Jackson.

But Gore was persuaded to change this approach, with the promise of no small reward for his efforts (he is still a very viable choice to get the vice presidential nod). So, Gore has started lashing out at Jackson for lack of political experience, creating a plausible argument which could be used to stop him at the convention.

Third, the party elites moved to set up the highly-publicized meeting with Jackson himself, in Washington, D.C. This was designed to show that no one in the party intends to deny Jackson anything that he rightfully earns through the primary process—another reassurance to the party rank-and-file.

However, the elites do not intend for a minute to hold good to this promise. In fact, from their point of view, the more important purpose of the meeting was to size up Jackson's willingness to play by the rules they hope to impose. Their offer to Jackson is that he be granted a cabinet-level post, along the lines of "minister without portfolio," in exchange for a promise that he tell his supporters he is satisfied with the deal, and works to get out the vote for the Democratic ticket in November.

If they deem that Jackson is willing to play by this arrangement, then you will see Jackson more and more embraced by the party, even as Gore continues his attacks. On the other hand, if they judge that he remains committed to wrecking the party, then they are prepared to take more drastic measures.