

Mr. Democrat

Al Sharpton is the party's latest comeback kid.

In January 1998, every New York Democratic senatorial candidate—plus the party's gubernatorial hopefuls—dutifully attended a Harlem public policy forum.

Which power broker managed to bring such Democratic luminaries as Geraldine Ferraro and Charles Schumer together in the first such gathering of the campaign? A party elder? Major media outlet? Nope. The big draw was Al Sharpton, the racial activist who had made his name with the Tawana Brawley hoax and, more recently, had called a Harlem store-owner a "white interloper" just weeks before his shop was burned to the ground.

But had anyone even alluded to such matters at the forum, he would have seemed the proverbial skunk at a garden party. True, the forum took place during Sharpton's trial for defamation in connection with the Tawana Brawley affair, but that hardly put a damper on the festivities. The Democrats' big guns spoke of Sharpton in such effusive terms that casual observers could have mistaken him for the second coming of Martin Luther King. Ferraro praised Sharpton's wit. Schumer expressed utter delight when Sharpton dubbed him "Reverend Schumer." If it worked for you, he gushed, it can work for me.

Today, much works for Sharpton. Once laughed off as a buffoon, Sharpton is still fat and loud. But he has emerged in the last few years as a genuine political player—embraced by the entire Democratic Party establishment from President Clinton on

down. Despite the media hype, no one should have been surprised this March when top Democrats got arrested for Sharpton's latest cause—and helped him turn a genuine tragedy into political gold that he will likely mine for quite some time.

In February, four white policemen in the Bronx shot and killed an unarmed African immigrant who, according to press reports, they thought was wielding a gun. To protest the killing, and supposedly rampant police brutality, Sharpton orchestrated daily "civil disobedience" protests outside New York City police headquarters. And what a turnout. Rep. Charlie Rangel, former Mayor David Dinkins,

and some 1,200 lesser-known folks were arrested. It was quite a show, as carefully choreographed as the

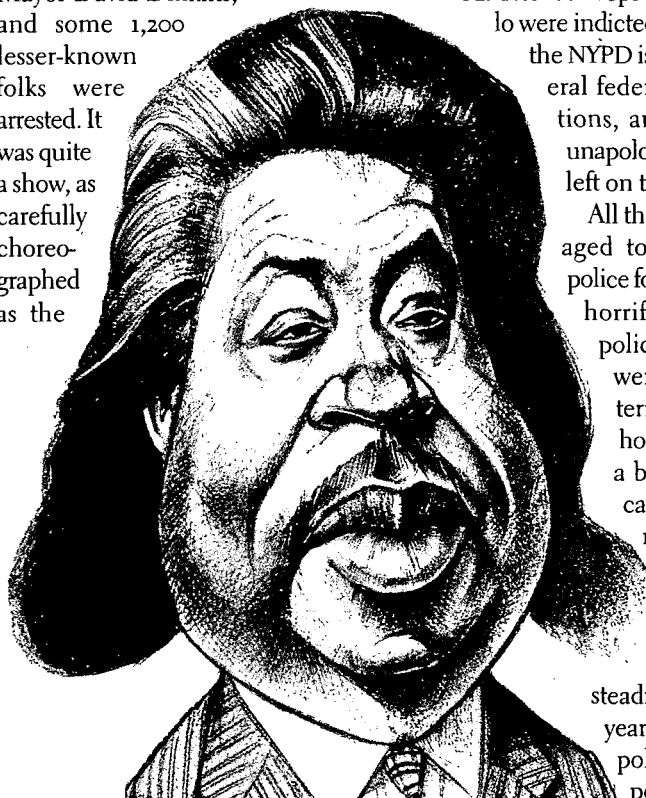
Democratic convention, and with a politically and ethnically correct bunch of participants to match.

Each day, the police received a list from Sharpton and Co. of whom to arrest. Sharpton was deluged with so many volunteers, he had to turn folks away. And the lucky few were divided into groups. One day was reserved for labor activists and members of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice; Latinos and Asians, another. And, of course, actors and actresses, such as Susan Sarandon. Appearances were clocked to the minute. On a day reserved for black political leaders, Sharpton raced to Penn Station to pick up NAACP president Kweisi Mfume so he could get arrested on schedule.

The protests ended in late March, but only after Sharpton got what he demanded. The four cops who shot Amadou Diallo were indicted for murder. Moreover, the NYPD is now the subject of several federal and state investigations, and even the normally unapologetic Rudy Giuliani was left on the defensive.

All the while, Sharpton managed to besmirch the entire police force over a single—albeit horrific—incident. The policemen who shot Diallo weren't rogue cops out to terrorize a black neighborhood; they were looking for a black serial rapist (later caught). Moreover, there's no evidence that NYC cops are a trigger-happy bunch; police shootings in New York have declined

steadily in recent years. Last year, New York's rate of fatal police shootings was 0.48 per 1,000 cops, a far lower



EVAN GAHR is a contributing writer for the *American Enterprise* magazine and a former New York Post press critic.

verage than major cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. More importantly, thanks to the cops that Sharpton's protesters likened to the KKK, crime is down throughout New York—especially in minority neighborhoods.

No matter: The Sharpton-led protests seemed designed to cripple Rudolph Giuliani's mayoralty and turn the clock back on his quality-of-life initiatives. "Sharpton has done what no Democratic candidate has done since Mr. Giuliani, a Republican, came to power," the *New York Times* reported. "He has assembled the remnants of the city's once-dominant liberal Democratic coalition and built upon that foundation."

That's no mean feat; most folks with a record like Sharpton's would have been driven from public life long ago. But after each odious incident, Sharpton somehow emerges stronger.

The pattern, of course, began with Tawana Brawley. In November 1987, Sharpton, then relatively unknown, claimed that a group of white men raped and kidnapped Brawley. The case dragged on for nearly a year. Sharpton and two compatriots told how the black teenager had fallen victim to a racist conspiracy that supposedly included a local district attorney with mob ties (Stephen Pagones) and a New York state official (Attorney General Robert Abrams) who masturbated with Brawley's picture.

The following year, a grand jury ruled the story false and specifically exonerated Pagones. Nevertheless, Sharpton emerged from his pack of lies with his credibility enhanced: He was now a bona fide civil rights leader who supposedly spoke for disaffected blacks.

Then came Crown Heights. In August 1991, a 7-year-old black boy, Gavin Cato, was accidentally killed by a Hasidic driver in Brooklyn. A Talmud student was killed four days later in retaliation during the four nights of riots that ensued. Sharpton did his best to sow further unrest. At Cato's funeral he reportedly denounced Jewish diamond merchants" and repeated a false rumor that a Jewish-operated ambulance wouldn't treat the boy as he lay dying.

Fresh from Jew-baiting in Crown Heights, he ran for the Senate in 1992, winning praise from such normally aggressive

competitors as Geraldine Ferraro. During their debate Sharpton, blessed with a quick wit, stole the show. And if another Democratic primary opponent, Robert Abrams, seemed uneasy about sharing a stage with a man who had compared him to Hitler, he didn't show it. But in December 1995, it seemed that Sharpton's luck had finally run out. On December 8 seven innocent people died in an arson attack on a white-owned Harlem clothing store, Freddy's Fashion Mart. The store, which actually rented the space from a black church, had been locked in a bitter dispute with a black subtenant it threatened with eviction.

Sharpton's role soon became clear. He joined the picket lines outside Freddy's—and even used his National Action Network radio program to denounce the owner of Freddy's as a "white interloper." Moreover, the head of his Buy Black committee, Morris Powell, had denounced the "Jewish department store" and promised to "make this cracker suffer."

In a telephone interview, Sharpton said he was in no way culpable for the attack. It was an assertion he hardly needed to make, because his actions and words quickly slipped down the media memory hole. For example, a *Daily News* piece on the first anniversary of the fire entirely omitted Sharpton's role.

When Sharpton decided to run for Mayor in 1997, Freddy's was all but forgotten by the press. *Newsday* took the occasion of his January 1997 campaign kick-off to publish a compilation of the "Wit and Wisdom of Al Sharpton." Staff writer William Murphy hailed the man's "talent for the use of biting quotes." He forgot quite a few from a recent speech at a New Jersey college, in which Sharpton, according to the *Forward*, explained that "White folks was in the caves while we was building empires. We taught philosophy and astrology and mathematics before Socrates and them Greek homos ever got around to it."

With those kinds of remarks omitted, readers were given the impression that Sharpton was simply a quick-tongued politician no different from Bob Dole. Sharpton finished a close second in the primary to Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger. He won 32.5 percent of the vote, and nearly forced a run-off election. At the time, however, City Comptroller Alan

Hevesi was the lone Big Apple Democrat who vowed to withhold his support if Sharpton won the party's nomination.

Sharpton lost, but his star continued to rise. Curiously, he even benefited when the defamation lawsuit brought by Stephen Pagones, one of the men Sharpton said had raped Brawley, finally went to trial in December 1997.

As the trial dragged on for months, Sharpton stuck to his story. But when the predominantly white jury finally found Sharpton and his two colleagues guilty, the verdict seemed anti-climactic. A far more important group of Sharpton's peers had made up their minds months earlier. Indeed, the Poughkeepsie, New York trial was barely underway before journalists explained that the entire Brawley affair was little more than youthful foolishness on Sharpton's part. Journalists explained that he had since tempered his rhetoric and matured.

Actually, the notion that Sharpton is a new man since Tawana Brawley—that he's undergone a metamorphosis akin to St. Paul's on the road to Damascus—is too big a whopper even for him.

As he told *USA Today*, "I'm still Rev. Al. The only difference is I've got a little gray on the side, I've gotten a little thinner and I take more people's opinions into consideration. Besides that, I haven't changed."

Quite true. Despite all the blather about his newfound moderation, all that's changed is that Sharpton now easily travels in Democratic power circles. (Note the contrast with how the GOP ostracized its own racist demagogue, David Duke. The Bush White House denounced Duke. But President Clinton is happily photographed with Sharpton, and, according to the *Forward*, the two even shared a warm hug last year.)

No wonder that Sharpton, downright giddy during the civil disobedience protests this March, bragged to the *New York Times* that he's recognized as a leader by just about everyone these days. True enough. But the next time Republicans are accused of being "divisive" or pandering to racial prejudice they could remind folks that a racist clown has been welcomed into the Democratic Party's big tent. ❄



by Grover G. Norquist

The Chairmen's Candidates

A candid assessment of the GOP presidential field.

In mid-April, Republican state chairmen met in historic Williamsburg, Virginia. In a press conference with Jim Nicholson, chairman of the Republican National Committee, they called on all GOP presidential hopefuls to observe Ronald Reagan's famous 11th Commandment: "Thou shall not speak ill of a fellow Republican."

Actually, Reagan's commandment has always been a little suspect. The man who pronounced it had himself challenged a sitting Republican president in 1976, and he coined it when—conveniently—he was already front-runner for the 1980 nomination.

The party chairmen invoked it because after eight frustrating years of Clinton they want to retake the presidency and believe Republicans will do so if they avoid a fratricidal nomination battle.

In past elections the Republican nominee would start well behind as a result of the Democratic Party's advantage in registered voters. Only as the campaign heated up would independents and conservative Democrats tell pollsters they were crossing over to vote Republican.

But this year party chairmen were looking at an ABC News/Washington Post poll released on March 16. It showed Texas Gov. George W. Bush defeating Vice President Al Gore by 54 to 41 percent. The same poll showed Elizabeth Dole defeating Gore by 51-43. Politicians found to be losing in early match-ups

usually argue—correctly—that these first polls are driven largely by name identification. That's no consolation to Gore, who's been a household name for years.

So how do the Republican chairmen view the nomination contest?

Their first observation—and for some the last—is that this race is George W. Bush's to lose. Bush has been endorsed by fifteen governors, 84 House members, and eight senators. Polls of primary voters show him hovering at around 50 percent, with Mrs. Dole in the teens and the other five candidates in single digits. In the first quarter of 1999 Bush's exploratory committee (he has yet to formally announce) raised \$7.6 million, and it has \$6.7 million in cash on hand. In the same period Gore, with only one competitor for Democratic cash, raised \$8.8 million and now has \$6.8 million on hand.

Steve Forbes's ability to finance his own campaign (he spent \$38 million in 1996), the 50-state network of supporters he built up last time, and non-stop party activity on his part since 1996 all mean he can stay in the nomination race as long as he wants. Should Bush turn out to have a glass jaw, Forbes will certainly still be in the ring.

Forbes's campaign for 2000 suffers from his unprecedented success in 1996. Back then he introduced two radical ideas into mainstream American politics: the flat-rate income tax and privatization of Social Security. Before Forbes both ideas were limited to the halls of free-market think tanks. Real politicians—those who win elections—were convinced that both ideas would scare

off voters. Social Security was viewed as "the third rail" of American politics—touch it and die. The flat tax was presumed to fly against voters' populist impulses.

Forbes didn't win the 1996 nomination, but he convinced many Republicans that the flat tax and privatization were fit for polite company. Since then the GOP has gone on record for some version of the flat tax and most every Republican now favors moving Social Security from the present Ponzi scheme to a fully funded, individually-held retirement system. Forbes has already changed American politics more than most presidential nominees and even some presidents.

Paradoxically, Forbes's success in converting the entire Republican Party to his issues means those issues are no longer exclusively his. That's good for the country and the party—but tough on the Forbes 2000 campaign.

Mrs. Dole enjoys a 74-13 favorable to unfavorable rating, according to the April 13-14 CNN/USA Today poll. She raised only \$676,000 in the first quarter of 1999, but then she's not really running for president. She's running for vice president. When the smoke clears and a Republican nominee emerges in the first part of next year, the winning campaign will undertake some serious polling and focus group research. I am adding a woman to the ticket guarantees victory in November, then Mrs. Dole has a job as veep. If it doesn't, then the nominee will choose a vice president from an electoral vote-rich state Gov. Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania or Gov. John Engler of Michigan.

Dan Quayle is liked and respected by party leaders, who first say the media has treated him shabbily but then openly wonder if his old wounds weren't fatal. Quayle

GROVER G. NORQUIST is president of Americans for Tax Reform.