

Being Al Gore

The "real" appeal of The Kiss

By Nick Gillespie

August's Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles was memorable for reasons that range beyond what is now simply called The Kiss. While there is no doubt that Al and Tipper Gore's final-night buss—variously described as spontaneous, cynical, passionate, and nauseating, it was all that and more—provided the most enduring image of the political season so far, The Kiss was only one part of an unprecedented invitation into the private life of a political candidate.

Judging from Gore's commanding and long-lived convention bounce—a boost that put him in the lead of the presidential race for the first time—there can be little doubt that many Americans readily jumped at the opportunity for a sort of psychic intimacy with the vice president. Designed to humanize a candidate routinely called "wooden" and "stiff" even by his supporters and to distance him from

Bill Clinton's seedy personal life, the final two nights of the convention, highlighted by testimonials from family members, even allowed Al Gore to wipe out a double-digit gender gap with George Bush and to create a similar margin in his own favor. Somehow, the vice president went from being an object of scorn, if not pity, to being one of electoral desire. How that happened is no small matter: Politicians, every bit as much as artists and ad men, are in the business of trying to manipulate emotions and change minds. Whenever they succeed, attention should be paid.

Gore's acceptance speech played a role, of course. As rhetorically shapeless as it was fiscally generous, the vice president's address flashed huge wads of government cash to virtually every segment of the voting population. (On his campaign Web site, Gore proudly details his promised payouts to no less than 28 separate interest groups.) There's no discounting the power

of such potential federal largess.

But we can also chalk up a large measure of Gore's success to what might be called the *Being John Malkovich* strategy. The evening before The Kiss, the Democrats aired a "Gore Family Video" put together by hip young director Spike Jonze, best known for the wonderful film *Being John Malkovich*, a fantasy in which people pay for the chance to literally get inside the head of actor John Malkovich for short periods of time. In part a meditation on the attraction of celebrity, *Beng John Malkovich* suggests that some of the audience's deepest thrills come from simply seeing public figures in the most domestic, least glamorous, most "real" settings possible: brushing their teeth, ordering towels over the phone, reading to themselves, and the like.

We get off, in other words, on seeing a star not just backstage but completely off-stage, engaged in the banal details of everyday life. Ironically, who the celebrity is may be less important than the fact of access itself; one of the film's running gags is that even as characters obsess over contact with him, no one is quite sure just who John Malkovich is.

Jonze's campaign film, about 15 minutes long and available on the Web at C-SPAN's convention archive (www.cspan.org/campaign2000), is shot in the ragged, vérité, hand-held-camera style familiar to fans of reality TV shows. It largely follows the vice president around during a visit to his boyhood "home" in Tennessee. (As is well known, Gore's main residence growing up was a Washington, D.C., hotel.) From time to time, Gore goes off on a policy jag while on camera, but most of the footage shows the vice president interacting with his mother, his wife, his children, and his grandchild in thoroughly unexceptional circumstances.

The unspoken premise of the film: We are getting a never-before-seen look behind the candidate's facade. We are seeing the "real" Al Gore, body surfing with his family this minute and dressed for Halloween as Frankenstein's monster the next. The potential leader of the free world



shows us the bedroom he used when he was a teenager ("the bed's still not made," Gore cracks), points out a revealing self-portrait Tipper painted while pregnant (prompting her to block the camera while objecting, "Al, you're *really* showing him our house..."), and makes funny faces for the benefit of his year-old grandson (and, more important, the camera). The film ends with Gore asking one of his daughters to turn out the lights and inquiring, "Now, do you want me to get up and cook breakfast for you?"

Clearly, this is not the same Al Gore we see on the public stage, the one shaking

tation consisted not of a traditional speech but of a "family photo album" of mostly personal pictures she'd taken over the past 30 years.


"I want to share a little bit more about Al and the life of our family," she explained, underscoring that we would see the vice president "in a way you may not have seen him before." And then, of course, after the parade of snapshots came *The Kiss*, an instance of ostensibly spontaneous, unmediated emotion on the part of the vice president.

The Kiss sent an obvious political message—here's a man still passionately, faithfully in love with his wife, unlike the president he hopes to succeed—that was ultimately far less important than the total openness and surrender it implied. Yes, Gore will let us watch, if that's what it takes to woo us.

Just as the media craves "access" above all else, voters too want an unmediated relationship with candidates and are ready

to reward those who give it. Such a dynamic explains virtually all of John McCain's appeal, which in the end rested less upon specific policy proposals and more upon his many gestures toward "straight talk" and the "genuine."

It goes without saying, of course, that the Al Gore kissing his wife on the convention stage was in no way authentic. We should no more confuse the Al Gore of Spike Jonze's campaign film with the real Al Gore than we should confuse the character "John Malkovich" in *Being John Malkovich* with the actor himself.

But such a distinction may be effectively moot in an age of open and endless artifice. As an audience, we may care less about who Al Gore, or any politician, "really" is and instead simply appreciate the fact that he is willing—desperate even—to play to us, personally as well as politically. 

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hands at the Buddhist Temple, or mechanically repeating the phrase about "no controlling legal authority," or stolidly presiding over the Senate.

Later the same night, Karenna Gore Schiff seconded her father's nomination. She, too, pointedly focused not on substantive policy issues but on revealing, intensely personal matters. "I know I would be supporting my dad for president even if he hadn't raised, fed, clothed, taught, and loved me," she announced, before proceeding to "talk about my father as a father."

The telling anecdote she chose to share at length: How years before, her father had helped her and a friend build an igloo after a big snow, how "he stayed up to check on us and brought us hot chocolate there under the stars." In a foreshadowing of *The Kiss*, Al Gore emerged from the wings after the speech and gave his daughter *The Hug*—a long, intense embrace that, as her mother would say about *The Kiss*, Karenna averred was totally spontaneous, totally genuine.

The family testimonials continued on the last night of the convention as well. When Tipper emerged to introduce her husband, she mentioned his political qualifications only in passing. Her presen-



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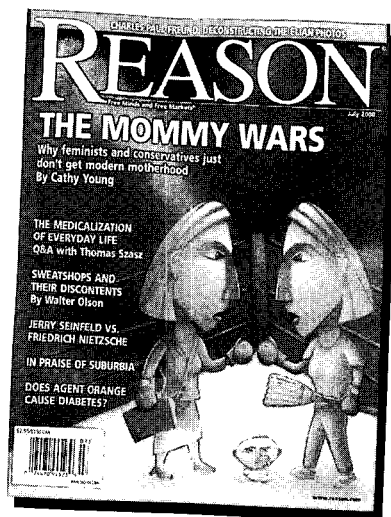
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Letters



Vouchers for Childcare

Many effusive thanks for the thrilling article by Cathy Young ("The Mommy Wars," July). On this vital issue, Young skewered both left-wing feminism and right-wing patriarchy most brilliantly.

I only wish that Young's own approach had been a little less narrowly ideological. As a libertarian, she'd like to leave childcare solutions not only to individual initiative but also to each family's bankbook—a free-market reflex that hobbles parents and kids on the lower rungs of the economic ladder.

A more democratic, common-ground solution would be to voucher childcare. Doing so would affirm that all of society has some stake in the socialization of every child, while placing control of that process in the hands of individual parents, where it belongs.

Vouchering childcare would help stay-at-home, work-at-home, and work-away parents equally. The state could bestow bonuses on care-takers—relatives, parents, professional providers—who were certifiably informed about how to keep kids safe, sated, stimulated, and sane. "Experts" could thus influence the quality of care, but individuals would still rule their own roosts.

Unlike education vouchers, childcare vouchers would not destroy a public institution; they would upgrade a private

one. Young has made the real needs of parents and kids top priority when analyzing policy. Why not push their interests to the fore when designing it?

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Mad About Szasz

Jacob Sullum's interview with Thomas Szasz ("Curing the Therapeutic State," July) impressed me above and beyond the typically sterling editorial quality of REASON to which I've grown accustomed. A free market in drugs and a coercion-free system of treating (or not treating) people with real or perceived mental hang-ups. What a concept! I found myself frantically underlining passages in the interview, something I never do.

I've always puzzled over why ideas such as Szasz's are so unthinkable to the majority of otherwise freedom-loving Americans. The only possible explanation is fear. Whenever the idea of legalizing drugs surfaces in public discourse, it seems the rebuttal is always something on the order of, "We'll become a nation of zombies!" No evidence is ever offered to support this claim, however.

In my view, a person's decision to use drugs or to abstain seldom, if ever, hinges on legal status. I know my own decision not to do drugs has had virtually nothing to do with their prohibition. People who are ambitious tend to avoid behaviors—drunkenness, drug abuse, sloth, frivolity—that they believe will interfere with the achievement of their goals. Whether or not such behaviors are illegal simply

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