

Open convention: the fixers' dilemma

by Konstantin George

Until this week, with the growing momentum of the "Billygate" scandal, the chances for an open convention and dumping Jimmy Carter were very high. The opportunity to seal Carter's doom as a candidate came Aug. 4 when Carter appeared to face the press corps on Billygate.

The opposite occurred. The national media let Carter off the proverbial hook—at least for the time being. It appears that the Eastern Establishment "fixers" have pulled back on Billygate, and on the question of whether to open up the Democratic Convention.

Underlying the indecision on whether to dump Carter and open the convention is the dilemma confronting the fixers in either case. Opening the convention carries the risk of sending it into an uncontrolled mode. Handing Carter the nomination, however, would mean a conscious decision to destroy the Democratic Party as an institution tied to constituency machines of organized labor, farmers, and minorities—in short, to scrap of the Democratic Party as a political vehicle.

Party power brokers have between now and Monday evening, Aug. 11, to make up their minds. On Monday night at 6:30 p.m. begins the crucial debate and vote on convention rules, which will determine whether the 3,000-plus Democratic delegates will be bound to vote for the candidate they were elected to represent. If Carter wins that vote, the party undeniably faces disaster this fall.

One of the key mediating points between the American Establishment's leading families and national Dem-

ocratic Party operatives is the cluster of fixers or power brokers grouped in several key Washington, D.C./New York City-based firms, whose senior partners are informally known within party politics as the "club."

The thinking of one of its senior members, who has close ties with the leaders of the Open Convention Committee on Capitol Hill and who is himself playing a very active role around the convention, illustrates the dilemma:

"Carter will be nominated, but there will be all sorts of problems. It will be messy . . . Billygate has reached a plateau—it won't get really worse now and will in fact get better for Carter, at least temporarily . . . My choice for 'third' candidates are Mondale or Muskie . . . but the open convention movement has peaked, and it peaked before it had enough support to win. Labor is not really in it and the candidates [specifically Jackson and Muskie] are not there."

The same insider also said openly that Carter—as his preconvention ace in the hole—might well stage a crisis over Iran to shore up his nomination: "I have heard there could be a blowup over Iran before or during the convention," he said. "Things are approaching a crisis level. If there is a crisis it will help Carter in the short term. People always rally around the President over the short haul."

The problem for this level of fixer, and the families who deploy them, is what they perceive as the danger of not knowing or controlling the outcome of the convention. To this crowd, there are only two acceptable convention outcomes: a Carter renomination, or, failing

that, a controlled and prearranged "third candidate" arrangement in which their designated man would acquire the nomination in no more than three or four ballots. Thus, the options of closing the convention, and negotiations for a controlled open convention, are proceeding simultaneously.

The operational capability exists to win the rules vote, unbind the delegates, and dump Carter on the first ballot. Every Democratic pro in the business knows that, given the word from a small number of key power brokers around Henry Jackson, the AFL-CIO, and state party barons, several hundred delegates at minimum would bolt from Carter, depriving him of the nomination. Every pro similarly knows that Kennedy's chances under such circumstances are zero.

Several independent surveys of the Carter delegates confirm that among them are more than the number required for a successful "Stop Carter" effort exists, and that such a situation would now develop with or without a Billygate. The recent release of national polls showing Carter with a mere 21 percent of the vote corroborates the readings of Democratic Party regulars concerning the scope of destruction a Carter renomination would entail. Disgust with Carter's policies, fears that his renomination will wreck the party, the administration's Abscam-Brilab witchhunt of Democratic elected officials and labor leaders, all help explain Carter's weakness.

The question at this juncture is whether the levers in place to dump Carter will be pulled. The biggest question marks center around Jackson and the AFL-CIO. If Jackson enters the race, or two or three key unions from the AFL-CIO which have endorsed Carter, broke from his campaign, enough momentum would be generated to finish off his renomination.

There will be between 400 and 500 AFL-CIO labor delegates at the convention, not counting the National Education Association (NEA) members, many of whom prefer Jackson to Carter. But so far, neither Jackson nor the AFL-CIO leadership has given the word.

One pro-Jackson national labor official summed it up: "We're big supporters of Jackson. We'd jump behind him now. But he's just sitting back. He won't come forward. I'm pessimistic about the chances for an open convention at this point, but if certain things happen—and we'll know fairly soon—things could change drastically."

Another national labor official and Jackson supporter declared: "Jackson won't run, and the AFL, Kirkland, is holding for Carter. That's the problem. If either moved, the other would have to move, and then we'd have Carter beat."

The mood of anti-Carter rebellion is strong in key state delegations. An increasing number of Democratic figures have broken with Carter and called for the convention to be open. In the last two days, Illinois Senator

Adlai Stevenson II echoed Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd's call for a rules vote that will not bind the delegates. In neighboring Wisconsin, Democratic State Chairman Joseph Checota has now done likewise. Four of Wisconsin's six Democratic congressmen and one of its senators have all called for an open convention.

While the outcome of the Aug. 11 convention rules vote is unpredictable, as of now all observers expect the vote to be close. The Carter camp concedes the point in private. High Carter campaign officials admit off the record that their own estimates show that a minimum of 100 delegates are on the verge of breaking with Carter.

The Kennedy and Jackson wings of the party this week began a high publicity series of anti-Carter preconvention maneuverings, a sure sign that no one really knows what will develop in the next several critical days.

The key initial maneuverings, widely covered on national television, included Senator Kennedy's meetings with Henry Jackson, and late in the day, with Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd.

Jackson used the occasion of the meeting to move a step closer toward a possible candidacy, blasting Carter's nomination as a disaster before a national television audience. "Senator Kennedy would run a stronger race against Ronald Reagan than President Carter," Jackson said. Kennedy in turn declared that Jackson was his main choice for Vice President should he be nominated.

These statements were issued with the knowledge that all party officials watching understand that to say "Kennedy would run a stronger race" is an indirect form of stating that a Carter nomination would lead to a GOP landslide, and that Kennedy has no chance to be nominated.

These maneuverings are clear preconvention positioning of the Jackson forces to move behind Scoop should the convention open. Majority Leader Byrd's office announced that Kennedy had informed Byrd that he, too, is on Ted's Vice Presidential candidate list.

Belatedly, on the eve of the convention, a Draft Jackson Committee has come off the drawing boards. The committee's formation reflects the fact that a Jackson candidacy must be in place, if the convention opens—otherwise, from the standpoint of the national fixers, an uncontrolled convention is all but assured.

The reason for that is straightforward. With the exception of Lyndon LaRouche, who has gained credibility in many party circles and consistencies as the catalyst and leader of the dump Carter and rebuild-the-party movement, there are no "third" candidates. Should the convention open, there is only one credible opponent to LaRouche: Scoop Jackson.

Events can and will change drastically by the hour between now and the convention rules floor fight early next week. For the fixers, however, until the final decisions are made, the dilemma remains.