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“Red Meat”: Words to Chew On at the DNC

By Ken Liss, Communication Librarian, O’Neill Library

“Where’s the beef?” asked Walter Mondale in 1984, mimicking a popular TV commercial and mocking Gary Hart’s ideas in one of the more memorable lines of that year’s Democratic presidential debates.

But at last week’s convention in Boston, simple beef just wouldn’t do. Ravenous reporters, carnivorous commentators, palpitating pundits, everyone, it seems, was on the lookout for “red meat.”

“There’s some red meat out there that’s going to be thrown to the audience tonight,” said Chris Matthews on MSNBC. “This was the red meat speech the Democrats were waiting for in this hall,” said Bill Schneider on CNN. “There was no doubt it was real red meat for these delegates,” said Tim Russert on NBC’s Today Show. “Tonight, the Democratic Convention.” said Ted Koppel, opening Nightline on the second night of the DNC, “Red meat for the blue states.”

The print media got in on the act, too. The phrase showed up in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Globe*, the *Herald*, *BusinessWeek*, *Time*, and elsewhere. It was applied to speeches by Al Sharpton, Ted Kennedy, Barack Obama, John Edwards, and others. One columnist marveled at the spectacle of vegan ex-candidate Dennis Kucinich feeding red meat to the audience at one of the sideshow events.

This wasn’t the first time “red meat” was used to describe a particular flavor of political rhetoric – or the media’s hunger for it. It was applied to Pat Buchanan’s riling up of the right wing in 1992 and 1996; to Ronald Reagan in his unsuccessful (1976) and successful (1980) campaigns to win the White House; to Spiro Agnew and his “nattering nabobs of negativism” attacks on the left from inside the Nixon administration. Anti-Vietnam War candidate Eugene McCarthy was criticized by potential supporters in 1968 for his professorial speaking style and lack of “red meat.”

In fact, a search of online resources available from the Boston College Libraries finds “red meat” used as a metaphor as early as 1931, when *Forum and Century* magazine described a publicity-seeking Episcopal bishop from New York as having “provided the hungry presses of New York with more red meat” than Al Capone, Aimée Sempel McPherson, ‘Legs’ Diamond, Billy Sunday, Albert Einstein, and Charles Lindbergh, among others. (Famed humorist James Thurber used “red meat” to good satirical effect in the same publication six years later.)

But despite this long history, a survey of news databases shows that “red meat” had never been used as frequently as it was during media coverage of the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

Why the sudden surge?

The answer may lie in a memo sent to convention speakers and speechwriters by the Kerry team before the DNC and picked up by the press. “Keep it positive,” it said in part. “Criticism of Bush is allowed, but only as a subtle or indirect dig when comparing Kerry’s vision to Bush’s record. Red meat won’t be served at this convention.”

There’s no better way, it seems, to whet the media’s appetite for something tasty than to tell them it’s not going to be on the menu at all.

Ken Liss is Communication Librarian at O’Neill Library. He traced the use of “red meat” as a political and media metaphor using online resources available at BC, including Lexis-Nexis, Factiva, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, and American Periodical Series Online, a database of digitized journals from 1740 through the early 20th century. For more on these and other online databases available to the BC community see the Online Databases page on the Libraries Web site at <http://metaquest.bc.edu:4545/libraries/resources/databases/databases.html>.