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**DESIGNING AND DELIVERING COMPELLING EXPERIENCES:
INSIGHTS FROM THE 2008 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION**

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Abstract

Purpose of paper – Joseph Pine and Jim Gilmore (1998;1999) coined the term “experience economy” to describe a paradigm shift in consumption. To survive in this new economy, businesses must provide customers with memorable consumption experiences. This paper suggests eight ingredients that need to be incorporated into a compelling experience. Commercial experience providers, not-for-profit organizations and political entities stand to benefit by integrating these elements in the experiences they provide to their targeted constituencies.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative phenomenological case study approach is employed using the 2008 Democratic National Convention as the referent for dissemination of a compelling experience.

Findings – Eight attributes were distilled that together constitute an unforgettable experience: planning, resourcing, targeting, anticipating, enabling, empathizing, framing, and engaging.

Practical Implications – All experience providers desirous of creating compelling customer experiences for their targeted audiences would find it worthwhile to actively incorporate each of these elements in their product.

Originality/value – This article uses a well-planned and well-executed political convention to uncover the building blocks of a compelling consumer experience.

Keywords: Experience Economy, Democratic National Convention, Political Offerings, Political Marketing.

Paper Type: Conceptual paper

1. Experience is the Key

Economic downturns notwithstanding, consumers the world over continue to seek memorable and compelling experiences. Indeed, a major part of the world economy seems transformed into an experience economy driven by the increasingly large multitudes of people searching for psychological self-dependence and well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Marketers and futurists concur that the secret to customer delight in the 21st century lies buried in the innards of customer experience. There is thus a new-found enthusiasm toward “engineering” customer experiences as a means to keep the customer coming back again and again (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994). The power of experience seems ubiquitous. Attend any convention in Las Vegas, from the Global Gaming Expo to the World Shoe Association, from the Adult Entertainment Expo to The Home Entertainment Show (T.H.E. Show), and you will find speaker after speaker proselytizing the need to provide the right customer experience. Sadly, when it comes to actually designing and delivering the experience, not many have the knowledge with which to manifest a memorable experience. One thing is clear. Successful marketers the world over are increasingly making customer experience the focus of value creation. Shopping centers, malls, and retailers are seeking ways to incorporate entertainment and surprises to make the shopping experience more enjoyable and thus differentiate themselves from competitors (Barbieri, 2005; Ibrahim and Wee, 2002; Sit, Merrilees and Birch, 2003).

Whether it is a retailer enticing shoppers or a political party wanting to ingratiate voters, a formalized marketing approach to creating an appropriate experience is indispensable for forging strong relationships with the desired stakeholders (Clulow, 2005). While there have been many developments in stakeholder theory over the years the primary definition comes from the seminal work of Freeman (1984) who defined a stakeholder as any group or individual that is affected by or can affect the organization’s objectives (Polonsky and Scott, 2005). In the years since the

development of this theory, the concept has been integrated into many academic areas including B2B systems (Gupta, 1995), multi-sector innovations (Bunn et al., 2002), not-for-profit marketing (Knox and Gruar, 2007) and consumer marketing (Miller and Lewis, 1991). From a marketing standpoint, the stakeholder perspective provides managers with a more specific understanding of customer relationships, thereby improving organizational performance (Kimery and Rinehart 1998; Polonsky 1996). Knox and Gruar (2007) contend that the theory of relationship marketing offers a “reformist agenda” for stakeholder management thanks to its emphasis on stakeholder collaboration beyond the immediacy of market transactions. The efficacy of relationship marketing, in turn, vests strongly in the experience the organization engineers for its stakeholders (Poulsson and Kale, 2004).

Like commercial organizations, political candidates and their affiliated party must market themselves to their constituents and stakeholders if they are to be elected to office (Newman, 1994; Lees-Marshment, 2001; Harris, 2001). Osaugwa (2008) defines political marketing as the application of marketing concepts, principles and approaches to political issues by persons, groups, organisations and nations. Similarly, Hughes and Dann (2009, p.244) define the concept of political marketing as “a set of activities, processes or political institutions used by political organisations, candidates and individuals to create, communicate, deliver and exchange promises of value with voter-consumers, political party stakeholders and society at large. In understanding the marketing process as applied to the political environment, Barnes, Harris, and Lewis (2002) alert us that further research is required to understand how to effectively position the candidate and use appropriate promotional tools. We focus on the immensely successful 2008 U.S. Democratic National Convention (DNC) to provide preliminary insights in this endeavour. The scope of our inquiry is, by definition, restricted to one political event in the Democratic Party’s quest to return to power after eight years in the opposition. We use the DNC as an exemplar of

staging successful events that have implications not just for political and not-for-profit institutions but for commercial organizations as well.

2. Methodology

The DNC performance was not a purely commercial experience. However, it resonates the characteristics of a commercial experience. Poulsson and Kale (2004, p.270) define a commercial experience as “an engaging act of co-creation between a provider and a consumer wherein the consumer perceives value in the encounter and in the subsequent memory of that encounter.” Consumers, in the DNC context would encompass key stakeholders such as the media, voters, donors, political personalities such as state governors and special interest groups. The dyadic dynamics between the experience provider and the consumers together define the experience, and it is therefore paramount that the producer designs its offering with the various consumer segments in mind.

Using the DNC political event as a base, we use a qualitative within case analysis to describe the characteristics of experience creation. From this phenomenological holistic approach, we interpret the underlying mechanics involved in producing events (cf. Miles and Huberman, 1994). Although totally context-dependent, the case-study approach was deliberately chosen for this research so as to maximize learning from the DNC phenomenon. As Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 222) rightly observes:

Context-dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert activity. Such knowledge and expertise also lie at the center of the case study as a research and teaching method or to put it more generally still, as a method of learning. Phenomenological studies of the learning process therefore emphasize the importance of this and similar methods: It is only because of experience with cases that one can at all move from being a beginner to being an expert. If people were exclusively trained in context-independent knowledge and rules, that is, the kind of knowledge that forms the basis of textbooks and computers, they would remain at the beginner’s level in the learning process.

The lead author of this study reviewed thirty-six hours of DNC coverage on television from August 25-28, 2008, mostly on *CNN*. *CNN* was chosen because unlike the broadcast

networks, the cable channels covered the convention all evening, and they also they spent a lot of time analyzing the event. *CNN* also led competing cable networks in Nielsen ratings during the DNC, averaging over 3.40 million viewers in prime time. Views of political personalities and TV commentators on various happenings within the convention were noted. Additional information on Convention preparation was gathered from leading U.S. newspapers and the Internet.

3. The U.S. Democratic National Convention Case Study

Irrespective of political orientation, most people who witnessed this marathon event—either in person or on TV—walked away deeply impressed. Never before in a span of four days have political commentators used the word “historic” with such high frequency. The event was historic for a number of reasons, the obvious one being the nomination of an African-American to the highest political office in the U.S. However, there were other important reasons as well from the standpoint of the viewing audiences. 38 million viewers watched the event on television, with approximately 85,000 people watching live at the INVESCO Field (more than John F Kennedy’s acceptance speech in Los Angeles). Add to this visitor stats from the official Web site — *DemConvention.com* — which racked up more than 3.2 million visits during the day of Obama’s acceptance speech and scored, in total, more than 2.6 billion hits during the August 25-28 political gathering. Visitors watched more than 350,000 hours of video on this site. For the first time in convention history, organizers offered live gavel-to-gavel coverage in high-definition video in both English and Spanish (*Rocky Mountain News*, 2008).

Media personnel and voters were suitably impressed with the DNC performance. An editorial in *The New York Times* on August 29, 2008 stated:

One test of a presidential candidate's strength, and often his best shot at winning, is how much he can mold his party in his image and rally it around a powerful argument for his election. Obama left Denver having made significant progress on both fronts.

Andrew Sullivan (2008) of *The Atlantic* had this to say about Bill Clinton's speech at the convention:

Readers know my personal disdain for Bill Clinton. But long-time readers will also know I have always defended his solid centrist, smart record in office and defended him against his most over-reaching enemies. Tonight, I think, was one of the best speeches he has ever given. It was a direct, personal and powerful endorsement of Obama. But much, much more than that: it was a statesman-like assessment of where this country is and how desperately it needs a real change toward reform and retrenchment at home and restoration of diplomacy, wisdom and prudence abroad. Yes, he nailed it with this line: People around the world have always been more impressed by the power of our example than by the example of our power.

With regard to the DNC, potential voters, political observers and the media would be key targets for the convention spectacle. The DNC also had to appeal to traditional special interest groups such as abortion rights activists, workers' unions, and organizations such as the Sierra Club. However, convention organizers deliberately steered clear of providing any real prominence to special interests. To quote the *New York Times* (2008) editorial again, “

The party rallying around Mr. Obama in Denver looked noticeably different. Part of that is real: his campaign's unprecedented registration drives have brought many new voters into the party and, we hope, permanently into the democratic process as a whole. Part, we suspect, was stage management. There was little display in the convention hall, and even less in prime-time broadcasts, of the placards of the teachers' and service workers' unions, of the National Abortion Rights Action League and the Sierra Club. That reflected the Obama campaign's sound analysis that American voters mistrust interest groups — except their own — and its brash conviction that Mr. Obama's drawing power is so strong that they can win without giving these groups prominence.

4. Findings

Deconstruction of the DNC experience led us to eight components constituting this offering: planning, resourcing, targeting, anticipating, enabling, empathizing, framing, and engaging.

Those into acronyms for retrieving complicated concepts can use the ellipsis f-r-e-e t-a-p-e to remember these eight elements. And yes, there are lots of free streaming videos (not tapes) covering the convention that can still be downloaded from the Internet.

4.1. Planning

Mark Twain once said, “It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.” The DNC certainly had its share of speeches (over forty, by our count), but that was just the tip of the iceberg. The sequence and choreography of events, the musical performances, the fireworks, the magnificent sets, and even the rhythmic waving of the placards all required careful planning. Welcoming over 50,000 people (around 85,000 for Obama’s acceptance speech) — delegates, visitors, politicians, volunteers, and the media — for this big time event necessitated meticulous preparation; nothing was left to chance. The Democratic National Convention Committee (DNCC) had started planning for the event long before it knew who the presidential nominee would be. Also in keeping with the ethos of sustainability, this convention was to be the most environmentally sustainable political gathering in modern American history. To ensure this objective, over a year’s planning went into the greening aspect alone (*Visit Denver*, 2008).

4.2 Resourcing

Having created a master plan and several detailed sub-plans for the experience offering, providers need to ensure that they are well-resourced to put the plan in practice. Of course, the key resource is money. The overall cost of the convention was around the \$120 million mark. This required financial commitment from over fifty major sponsors, from soft drink manufacturers such as Coke and Pepsi, to telecom companies like Qwest and AT&T. Funding, however, is but one of the many resources needed to pull off an impressive performance.

Tasks such as enlisting eloquent public speakers, booking engaging musical acts, ensuring the right venue, and soliciting media support, all demand a variety of resources—capital, technical, manpower, and networking—to mention just a few. Along with the current Democratic governors’ speeches, there were speeches by former presidents and vice presidents (Bill Clinton, Al Gore), and “impromptu” hallway speeches by celebrities such as actor Jamie Foxx. Multiple receptions were held so that the notable and the select could network. For instance the First Lady

of Denver booked luncheons at a local restaurant for fellow governors' spouses to mingle. Companies such as CH2M Hill, Xcel Energy, HealthOne, ProLogis and prominent law firms threw lavish parties, many having reserved upscale venues and restaurants to network with guests and also get some business done on the sidelines.

The technical demands of the event required appropriate resourcing. Denver's Pepsi Center and INVESCO Field are just fine for their concerts and professional sporting events. However, when it came down to creating the technological infrastructure for the convention, both these venues required serious digital facelift. This meant the teaming up of several hi-tech companies including ATandT, Cisco, Comcast, Hewlett Packard, and Symantec. Improvements to the existing technological infrastructure involved 3,344 miles of optic fibre, 140 miles of copper and coaxial cable, 2,600 additional data lines, 3,400 voice grade circuits, video equipment capable of handling 130 simultaneous feeds, and state-of-the-art network security. In keeping with the sustainability objective, computer servers were configured to use the most energy efficient voltage (220 volts vs. 110 volts), ensuring energy efficiency improvements over traditional configurations. The Democratic National Convention Committee (DNCC) also selected energy efficient operating and software systems for computers throughout the organization, thus saving up to 80% of the energy used on a PC. All servers, personal computers, printers and copiers used within the DNCC office had to be Energy-Star rated.

4.3 Targeting

Many event managers sometimes forget that endearing their product to various stakeholders requires a solid understanding of who their target customers are and what they need. Like successful commercial experience providers, the DNCC had to define and delineate its target audience. Lack of precise constituents' definition – in business and in politics – invariably results in a bland experience that few constituents can identify with.

While potential voters and media personnel comprised the broad audience for the convention, the needs and aspirations of various subgroups were not ignored. Specific offerings and appeals were carefully crafted to accommodate key subsegments –minority voter segments, disappointed supporters of Hillary Clinton, defectors from the Republican Camp, women, and younger voters. Daily themes such as ‘One nation’ (August 25th),” ‘Renewing Americas promise’ (August 26th), ‘Securing Americas future’ (August 27th) and ‘Change we can believe in’ (August 28th) were crafted in an attempt to win the hearts and minds of key constituencies. As mentioned earlier, convention organizers successfully traversed the fine line between acknowledging agreement with the concerns of key special interests and creating a perception of downright pandering.

4.4 Anticipating

Once targeted constituencies have been identified, the experience provider needs to articulate the needs, wants and desires of the subsegments constituting the target. Take women, a key determinant of the outcome of U.S. presidential elections. Referring to the 2004 presidential elections, an article in the July 27, 2004 edition of *Boston Globe* stated, “The man who moves the hearts of women—and, more important, their feet—at the polls can be swept into office in November. Call it the skirt-tail effect” (Loth, 2004). Convention speakers recognized that successfully courting the large subsegment of women required understanding and acknowledgement of their issues, wants, concerns, and aspirations. Speaker after speaker at the DNC made it a point to impress upon women voters by talking about issues such as equal pay, abortion rights, the glass ceiling, and health care.

On-going market research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to ensure that the needs, wants, desires, and expectations of the target market are rightly assessed. This knowledge constitutes the foundation on which the experience edifice is erected. However, a caveat is in

order. Be it political marketing or commercial experience marketing, researchers need to be aware of the inherent response bias in voice of the customer (VOC). When asked their opinion on an issue, voters or customers will give it, regardless of their knowledge level or importance of the issue for them. In *Fear and Courage in the Democratic Party*, Glenn Hurowitz (2007), President of Democratic Courage, a political action committee, writes, “Voters tend not to have strong opinions about the most contentious issues of the day... A recent study in the journal *Political Behavior* found that although opinions about the Iraq war could have some significant effect, party identification was still the much more powerful factor.” Similarly, when consumers of commercial experiences are asked about their ideal experience, a rather long and expensive list of attributes is only to be expected. Seasoned providers learn to separate the doable and realistic desires from the preposterous and extravagant.

4.5 Enabling

The cliché in services marketing is that when the service firm communicates to its customers through advertising, it is making a promise to the customer; when the firm interacts with its employees to motivate and engage them in delivering the best service to the customer, it is enabling that promise. Treating employees as customers and dealing with them accordingly is commonly referred to as internal marketing.

Akin to commercial experience providers, performance of the people delivering the experience was the most important determinant of the quality of the DNC experience. This meant careful attention to recruiting the more than forty convention speakers, a well thought-out choice of musical acts such that the artists had a broad appeal and their political views and values echoed those of the Democrats, and careful selection of over 17,000 volunteers. Once the people were on board, it was the responsibility of the organizers to make sure that they had the right equipment and props—from placards to fireworks, and plasma televisions to teleprompters to deliver the

right performance. Enabling the service promise is predicated upon meticulous attention to selection, hiring, motivation, training, and equipping internal customers or employees.

4.6 Empathizing

Empathy involves projecting a sense of shared experience, including emotional and physical feelings, with one's audience or customers. Literature on services marketing lists empathy as one of the five key dimensions of service quality. Within the services literature as well as in the field of communications, the most frequently used definition of empathy is that it is a person's "vicarious matching of another's affective state or is a combination of emotional matching and sympathetic responding" (Stiff, et al., 1988).

In the context of commercial experiences, the manner in which employees display emotion or feelings has a strong impact on the attractiveness of the inter-personal climate and the perceived quality of the experience itself. The display of empathy calls for emotional labor, a behavior that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild, 1983, p.7).

Barack Obama may not have formally studied services marketing and is in all likelihood unfamiliar with the research in communications. But he definitely understands and often uses the term, "empathy deficit" in his speeches. George Lakoff, one of the world's best-known linguists and political scientists, attributes Barack Obama's popularity to his messages of "empathy, caring, and human dignity." In his Atlanta speech on January 20, 2008, for example, Obama said:

I'm not talking about a budget deficit. I'm not talking about a trade deficit. I'm not talking about a deficit of good ideas or new plans. I'm talking about a moral deficit. I'm talking about an empathy deficit. I'm taking about an inability to recognize ourselves in one another; to understand that we are our brother's keeper; we are our sister's keeper; that, in the words of Dr. King, we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny."

Speaking of education in his convention speech on August 28, Obama empathetically asserted:

Now is the time to finally meet our moral obligation to provide every child a world-class education, because it will take nothing less to compete in the global economy. Michelle and I are only here tonight because we were given a chance at an education. And I will not settle for an America where some kids don't have that chance. I'll invest in early childhood education.

It was not just Obama's DNC speech exuding with empathy; Bill and Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama tried equally hard to portray their identification with, and concern for, the Main Street voter. Hillary Clinton expended a lot of emotional labor in concealing her disappointment at not getting her party's nomination for president. And in her convention speech, Mrs. Obama said, "And I come here as a mom, as a mom whose girls are the heart of my heart and the center of my world... Their future—and all our children's future—is my stake in this election."

4.7 Framing

Frames are metaphors that serve to structure our experience and understanding of the complex world around us. According to the framing expert George Lakoff, U.S. Republicans are experts at framing, while the Democrats hardly appear to understand how the technique works. Judging by Democrats' recent performances, things are changing.

After their defeat in the 2004 presidential election and the setbacks received in both houses of Congress, House Democratic lawmakers held a retreat in Virginia to hash out their future strategy. According to Joshua Green (2005), a writer for *The Atlantic*, the Democrats returned from Virginia "not with an exit strategy for Iraq or a national security blueprint or an economic policy but with a book—*Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, by George Lakoff..."

Conceptually, framing is not very different from the branding of a product. It involves using new language to make otherwise old ideas more appealing to targeted publics. In politics, "taxes" are referred to as "membership fees," and "trial lawyers" as "public protection attorneys." The essence of framing, says Green, is to simplify large ideas and disguise them

behind innocent but powerful-sounding phrases. At the 2008 Convention, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said in his speech, “At best [more oil] is an 18th century answer to a 21st century crisis; at worst its pure baloney.” Of course, most of the audience was unaware that this was a direct takeoff from the title of Lakoff’s (2008) book on framing: *The Political Mind: Why You Can’t Understand 21st-Century American Politics With an 18th-Century Brain*. In his convention speech, Obama used framing very creatively when he referred to factionalism within the U.S. population as a promise: “This too is part of America’s promise – the promise of a democracy where we can find the strength and grace to bridge divides and unite in common effort.”

4.8 Engaging

Pine and Gilmore (1999) contend that in today’s highly competitive business environment, it is not enough to simply entertain consumers; a firm should strive to engage them. Engagement is a product of planning, resourcing, targeting, anticipating, enabling, empathizing, and framing done right. Deep engagement with an experience creates a state of flow; based on the culmination of concentration, interest, and enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Providers of commercial experiences can boost engagement by adding the element of interactivity or co-creation to the experience and by ensuring that the experience is deemed personally relevant by consumers. It is deep engagement with the experience that helps make it memorable (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). The DNC sought to induce engagement by incorporating devices such as blogging facility on the official convention website and holding a *YouTube Contest* where the winner’s video was later played on the big screen at INVESCO field. Allowing the audience to expand the experience, such interaction provides a means by which people can create a customized reality, a role for themselves, and even trance-form themselves (Petkus, 2004).

5. One slight glitch?

In staging experiences, it is vital that the venue and theme fit the character and ethos of the enterprise staging the experience. Barack Obama's big speech on the last day of the convention was delivered from an elaborate columned stage resembling a miniature Greek temple. Scholars could question this paradoxical choice of set when the theme for the evening was, "Change We Can Believe In!" The historically modeled mock edifice may have undermined authenticity of the change message Obama was trying to portray. In this set selection, DNC organizers should have listened to Pine and Gilmore's (2008, p.19) admonition, "People increasingly see the world in terms of real or fake, and they want to buy the real from the genuine—not the fake from some phony... (A)uthenticity is becoming the new consumer sensibility." Fortunately for then Senator Obama, majority of listeners were sufficiently under the spell of his oratory to notice the anomaly in setting. A lesser orator may not have been as successful or lucky.

6. Implications for practice

Vacationing at Disney World, having a flutter at the gaming tables by the dancing fountains at the Bellagio Casino in Las Vegas, partaking of the fantasy in Merchants of Bollywood, or witnessing the Viva Vision light show in downtown Vegas, consumers are enthralled, engaged, or transformed by the experience offering. The precise recipe for a successful experience however, remains largely elusive.

By deconstructing the Democratic Convention, we have shed some light on the key success ingredients for experience creation. Be it a cinema owner wanting to differentiate its product or a church concerned about preserving membership in the increasingly digitized spiritual marketplace, endowing the experience design and delivery with the attributes of planning, resourcing, targeting, anticipating, enabling, empathizing, framing, and engaging will enhance the quality of the perceived experience. Of course, while some ingredients such as

planning and targeting will be equally important in all contexts, the salience of others such as framing would vary, based on the experience provided.

In pursuit of a successful offering, marketers of commercial as well as political experiences need to take a close look at their target market to identify the attributes desired by stakeholders. Anticipating the needs of the targeted constituencies informs strategies for attracting, satisfying, and retaining the right customers or supporters. Elaborate planning is then needed to ascertain that all elements going into the experiential product are not only available, but that they will also perform as desired and when needed. Resourcing ensures availability of finance and other assets needed for design and implementation of the product — the dancing fountain at Bellagio cannot operate without the water or sound system, and the dancers in Merchants of Bollywood would be nowhere as charming and convincing without their colorful costumes. Enabling the workforce through meticulous selection, appropriate training, meaningful incentives and the right equipment keeps the internal customers motivated and energized. Where appropriate, empathizing and framing, be it in the experience itself or in the promotion of the experience to potential customers, will create a receptive mindset for the experience. When combined with the attributes of interactivity and consistency, consumers of the experience will be engaged and *trance*-formed. The ingredients of experience design and delivery discussed in this article thus constitute the core of memorable experiences.

7. Epilogue

Over 38 million Americans tuned in for television coverage of Barack Obama's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention. Nielsen analyst Anne Elliot is quoted in a Reuters report as saying that Obama's audience tally is probably the biggest for any televised convention speech in history. Now that the election outcome is known, we can say that the DNC contributed at least partially to Obama's epic victory. There exists ample evidence in literature to suggest that

a well-orchestrated campaign can frame an election, guiding the public discussion of the campaign and of the political environment in a way that favors its candidate (Iyengar, 1991; Vavreck, 2009). Masket (2009) informs us that high-profile events by a presidential campaign, particularly convention speeches and visits by a candidate to an area, can produce a short-term boost in that candidate's favorability (see also Hillygus and Jackman, 2003; Shaw, 1999).

Based on our analysis, the DNCC was very successful in crafting a memorable convention experience. Commercial experience providers and political marketers could use the 2008 Democratic Convention as a case study to appreciate and imbibe the key ingredients of a compelling experience. Planning, resourcing, targeting, anticipating, enabling, empathizing, framing, and engaging—all contributed toward the making of a powerful experience called the 2008 Democratic National Convention. In our deconstruction of the DNC, we may have missed out on a couple of other success ingredients, but as Barack Obama said in his acceptance speech, albeit referring to George W. Bush, “*Eight is enough!*”

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