

# WORLD

## & COMMENT

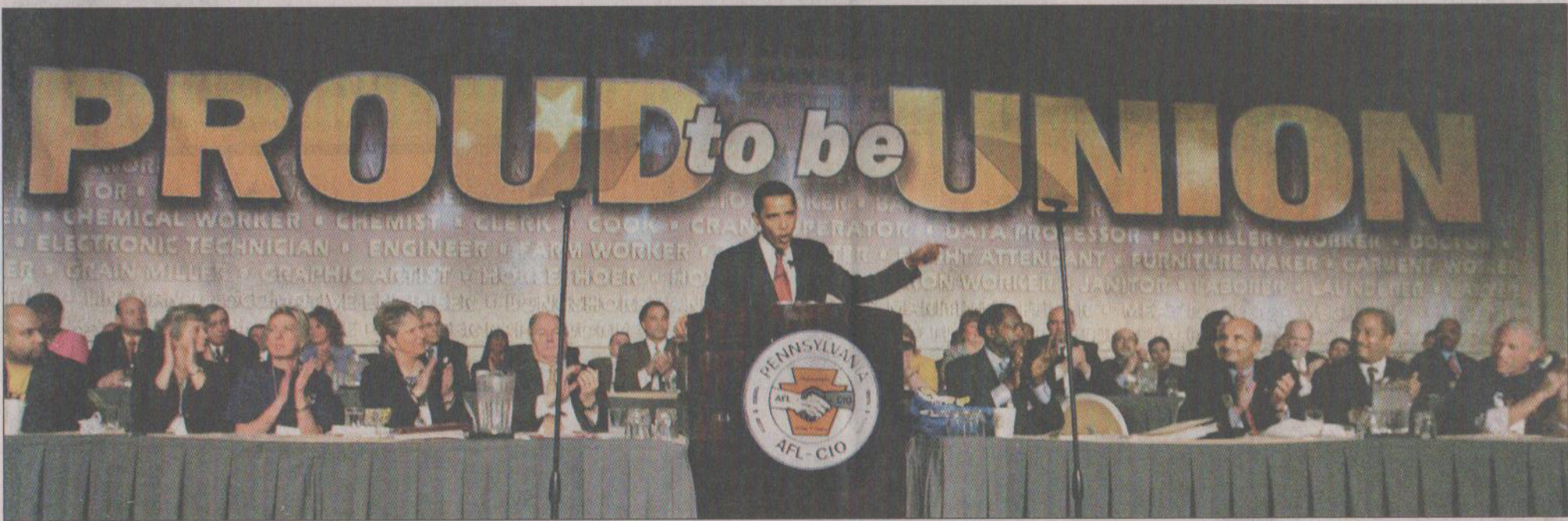


**INDEPENDENCE DAY**  
Mugabe denounces  
Britain at festivities  
**PAGE AA3**

**LADIES' MAN?**  
Putin denies affair,  
but embraces the title  
**PAGE AA2**



### WOOING LABOUR



TIM SHAFFER/REUTERS

Presidential hopeful Barack Obama speaks at AFL-CIO convention in Philadelphia earlier this month, while rival Hillary Clinton, below, speaks at a high school outside the city yesterday.

### JOURNAL: PHILADELPHIA

## Both Clinton and Obama winners in the Spin Room

**TIM HARPER**  
WASHINGTON BUREAU

PHILADELPHIA—When Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton finally holstered their weapons after this week's Democratic debate, 650 journalists bolted for a room where the curtain was just going up on a strange, time-honoured American political ritual.

Here, in this theatre of the absurd known as The Spin Room, young campaign aides expectantly and apprehensively hold simple signs on a stick identifying their candidates, awaiting the stampede.

In The Spin Room, Obama always wins, according to Obama operatives. And, following the script ev-

eryone knows so well, Clinton always wins, according to the Clinton operatives.

It's unclear if any news ever happens in a Spin Room, but the air is always heavy with hyperbole. If you're not careful, you could trip over the boasts and embellishments that litter the room or get whacked by a shooting superlative.

"I would like to take credit for how well she did tonight, but the only person who can take credit for this is Hillary Clinton," said Geoff Garin, who happens to be Clinton's chief strategist, standing beneath a white sign that read "Sen. Clinton."

SPIN continued on AA2



BRIAN BAER/MCT/SACRAMENTO BEE

L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa puts a spin on things after a debate.

## A strange political ritual

SPIN from AA1

"Look, she's really smart. This was a magnificent performance by her." Cameras rolled, pens flew across notepads, tape recorders fought for position and reporters jostled for the best vantage point.

At the back of this scrum, another question bubbled through the throng.

"Who is this?" reporters asked each other.

A few metres away, Democratic congressman Patrick Murphy stood beneath the Obama sign and intoned, "I think Senator Obama won the debate."

As he spoke, a colleague asked the *Star* correspondent the urgent question.

"Do you know who that is?"

The loneliest person in The Spin Room on this night was a tiny 18-year-old who held a yellow sign that read "Patient. Ask Me About My Chronic Disease." Nobody did.

Journalists only wanted to ask Clinton spokesperson Howard Wolfson about the candidate's Bosnia gaffe, practically knocking poor Sarah Yourman to the ground.

"I'm disappointed that I didn't hear anything tonight about health care," she said to the only reporter who would stop and ask a young woman about her cystic fibrosis, diabetes and Crohn's disease.

Like all debates, this one began with thousands of supporters of each candidate standing behind police barriers, chanting slogans and waving signs from across the street. When reporters arrive — they don't actually get into the debate room,

but watch it on television from a huge media filing centre — the American obsession with hierarchy really begins.

This is ABC's gig, so hundreds of journalists are held back on the terrace like some unruly mob, waiting to get to their computers.

They will not be allowed to disturb anchor Charlie Gibson as he reads an item on his *Nightly News*.

Inside the building, local reporters sit here, national reporters sit there, over there are the TV people, back there is for radio, and foreign journalists are politely asked to please go as far away as possible, just barely in the same area code.

So on this night, we are hustled downstairs to the Stars and Stripes School Lunchroom, along with the prepubescent Scholastic news service reporters, where we hunch over tiny cafeteria benches like children who are not yet old enough to eat at the adult table.

A cup of coffee and a box lunch is two flights of stairs away.

There we must endure *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune* on the television screen, which is flanked by vending machines with Out of Order signs on them.

One of the Scholastic correspondents keeps shouting out correct questions to the *Jeopardy* answers and we marvel at life in the fast lane of a big presidential campaign.

Ah, but at the end of the night, we're closer to The Spin Room.

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