It's the top of the ticket that wins presidential elections

By LAWRENCE C. LEVY

In the end it will come down to the two top guys.

On Election Day, less than two months from now, voters will little note nor long remember what anyone said these past two weeks at the Denver and St. Paul conventions. And for all the obsession over the Hillar...
have to throw red meat to a party base – not after choosing such a conservative running mate. But he took no chances, name dropping Ronald Reagan, bashing teacher unions and talking about "the culture of life" and "school choice."

But also like Obama, McCain did have to make millions of undecided voters – the mostly middle class, heavily female slice of the electorate – feel that he understands and cares about their problems. He tried to connect – with talk about families he met who are in trouble or serving the country – and, while not scoring a bull's-eye, did not fall very short. "I fight for you," he said. "Fight with me."

McCain didn't back away from defending an unpopular war and certainly didn't back away from the heat on Palin. "I'm very proud to have introduced our next vice president to the country," he said, trying to score points with women and with everyone as an unconventional politician and reformer. "But I can't wait until I introduce her to Washington. And let me offer an advance warning to the old, big spending, do nothing, me first, country second Washington crowd: change is coming."

McCain didn't do much to reassure voters he would not be a policy clone of the unpopular George W. Bush, as he must do. McCain was more explicit in asserting he really is a bipartisan-minded maverick – an image Democrats hit as mostly hype.

As he had to, McCain sought to take voters beyond the well-known terrors of the Hanoi Hilton. But not completely beyond.

"I fell in love with my country when I was a prisoner in someone else's," McCain said. "I loved it because it was not just a place, but an idea, a cause worth fighting for. I was never the same again. I wasn't my own man anymore. I was my country's."

And now McCain is his party's man. Palin still could be a disaster. She may not win over enough women voters who are now at least curious. And McCain didn't exactly blow the doors off the arena to excite swing voters.

But McCain and the GOP leave St. Paul far more unified and energized than anyone could have imagined after the Democrats' successful convention. Now both parties are ready to engage on equal footing. That Obama and Palin alone attracted nearly 80 million viewers says that the public is ready to look and listen.

*Lawrence C. Levy, a former editorial writer and columnist for Newsday, is the executive director of the Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University.*