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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 Hillarys, Bills, Michelles and Sarahs, voters won't base their final choices on what they think of the supporting players in this extraordinary two-week political soap opera.

Even Wednesday night's poised, pugnacious slap shot delivered by the self-proclaimed "suburban hockey mom," Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin, will lose much of its power to persuade. The 37 million TV viewers – reportedly only three million fewer than tuned in to Barack Obama's stadium extravaganza – will be moved more by how she either reinforces her strong points or crumbles in the face of intensifying media scrutiny. In the end, barring a huge scandal involving either of their running mates, the next president will be the candidate who makes the best case for himself. And Thursday night, a week after Obama raised the bar for a generation of political orators, a week after the young Democrat unified his fractious party and made the Republican campaign seem slow and stale, John McCain had his chance to make his case to millions.

McCain, a hero in war but a stiff on the stump, behind in the polls as he was much of the primary season and under fire in the world beyond the adoring GOP delegates – only delivered a workmanlike performance. But it may have been strong enough.

There were few moments as stirring as his compelling, closing call for more involvement in public service. But he may have shown enough soul-bearing sincerity and self-deprecating humility in the telling of his Vietnam War captivity, offered enough soft-talk in pledging to work with Democrats, enough tough-talk (and command) about national security issues and enough specific if stale domestic policy prescriptions – such as increased oil drilling and tax cuts – to keep himself and his party in the game.

Unlike Obama, McCain did not have to inspire voters to imagine him as president, not after his years of public service. Like Obama, McCain did not

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.

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