

U.S. Democrats hope Vancouver convention can help change the world

Monday » April 14 » 2008

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Vancouver Sun

Monday, April 14, 2008

Wayne Weightman flew on his own dime from Southeast Asia to support Barack Obama at the Democrats Abroad global convention in Vancouver -- and not just because of his boyhood connection with the Illinois senator.

Weightman, who now works as an immigration lawyer in Cambodia, said Obama is popular enough internationally to revive America's slumping image overseas.

"We Democrats Abroad see what is going on in the rest of the world and we can see the direct effect of America's foreign policy," Weightman said.

"And in the last eight years, it's been tough to be an American abroad. We're constantly apologizing."

Weightman is one of about 100 members of Democrats Abroad who have come from every continent -- at their own expense -- to attend the group's global convention here. The Democrats Abroad debated policy and selected delegates to the party's August national convention in Denver.

Weightman was a classmate and buddy of Obama in the '70s, when both attended Punahou School, a top private school in Hawaii.

"He was a nice person, he got along with everybody. We liked to go body surfing. We weren't all the most studious. But we did what was required."

Weightman said he gradually lost contact with Obama after both men left Hawaii to attend universities in the U.S. and begin careers.

So it was quite a shock for Weightman when he was in Cambodia watching the 2004 Democratic Party convention on CNN and heard pundits praising the speech given by a guy with the same last name as his high school chum.



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun

Democrats Abroad member Zach Klonoski, whose brother, Jake Klonoski, a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan, is hoping to become a delegate to the Democratic party's convention in August.

"I'm thinking could that be my buddy Obama?" he recalled.

Weightman wasn't the only American expatriate attending the Democrats Abroad gathering to lament how the U.S. has lost stature globally during the past eight years.

"Under the Bush administration, America's position throughout the world has toppled," said Peter Alegi, a retired lawyer based in Rome who was chosen as a delegate supporting Hillary Clinton.

"It hasn't just slid, it has toppled. And it will take years if not decades to bring it back up."

Alegi, 72, said Europeans have been appalled over the Republican administration's willingness to set aside conventional civil rights for detainees captured in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Ken Sherman, a Hamilton, Ont., resident who was selected as a convention delegate pledged to Obama, said that when he visits Europe, he normally uses his Canadian rather than American passport because of international anger over U.S. foreign policy.

"In the last five years with George Bush, I don't pull out my American passport unless I need it."

But Obama's rise to prominence has made Sherman, 71, prepared to embrace his American citizenship.

"Something has happened in the past two years that has made me proud to be an American again. People are rising up."

Similarly, Democrat Abroad member Miki Noguchi, 28, said: "I've lived in France and now in Japan and it's been difficult to defend America.

"And I think Democrats Abroad understand that the choice we make doesn't just affect us. It affects every single person who inhabits this earth."

Robert Kelley, an evangelical minister and finance consultant who works in South Africa, said the delegate-selection process at the Democrats Abroad meeting has been fierce because the Obama-Clinton race is so tight.

"There is a lot of politicking going on here," said the 53-year-old African-American. "The Democrats Abroad have 22 delegates and 11 votes and that represents close to five per cent of where the two candidates stand now.

"It's a percentage that can make a difference."

Among the Democrats Abroad here are three national convention superdelegates, including Leo Perez Minaya, an American citizen who lives in the Dominican Republic and is supporting Clinton.

"Most of the Latinos -- they've known the Clintons for years," said Minaya, "and [former] president Clinton and Hillary Clinton understand the wants and needs of the Latino community."

Minaya said that as a super-delegate he is called frequently by reporters to see whether he is wavering in his support for Clinton. He added that the Dominican Republic was one of only three countries --Israel and the Philippines were the others -- where Clinton took more votes than Obama in the Democrats Abroad global primary in February.

"And I received a personal telephone call from president Clinton saying thank you to me."

Meanwhile, a few young Canadians supporting Obama showed up on the weekend to watch the Democrats Abroad gathering.

Andriy Mishchenko, 24, is a member of Canadians For Obama, which has a Facebook site with about 200 members from B.C.

Mishchenko and about 20 other, mostly young British Columbians spent a few days in February campaigning for the Obama team in the Washington State caucus. They helped phone voters, knocked on doors and put up posters, sleeping most nights on the floor of an Obama campaign office.

Mishchenko also flew down to Texas to help the Obama campaign in that state's primary.

"For me personally, what separates Obama from the others is foreign policy," said Mishchenko, who is a fundraiser and website designer.

"He is the only candidate who has said that he is willing to sit down with countries that the U.S. doesn't get along with and have a constructive dialogue."

A.J. Puri, another Vancouver-based member of Canadians for Obama, said that among the 20 Canadians who worked in the Washington primary, six were New Democrats, six were Liberal, six were apolitical and two were Conservatives.

"Obama's mission is to bring everybody under one tent -- Republicans, Democrats and undecideds.

"And in Canada, it's already happening. He has a lot of support here."

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