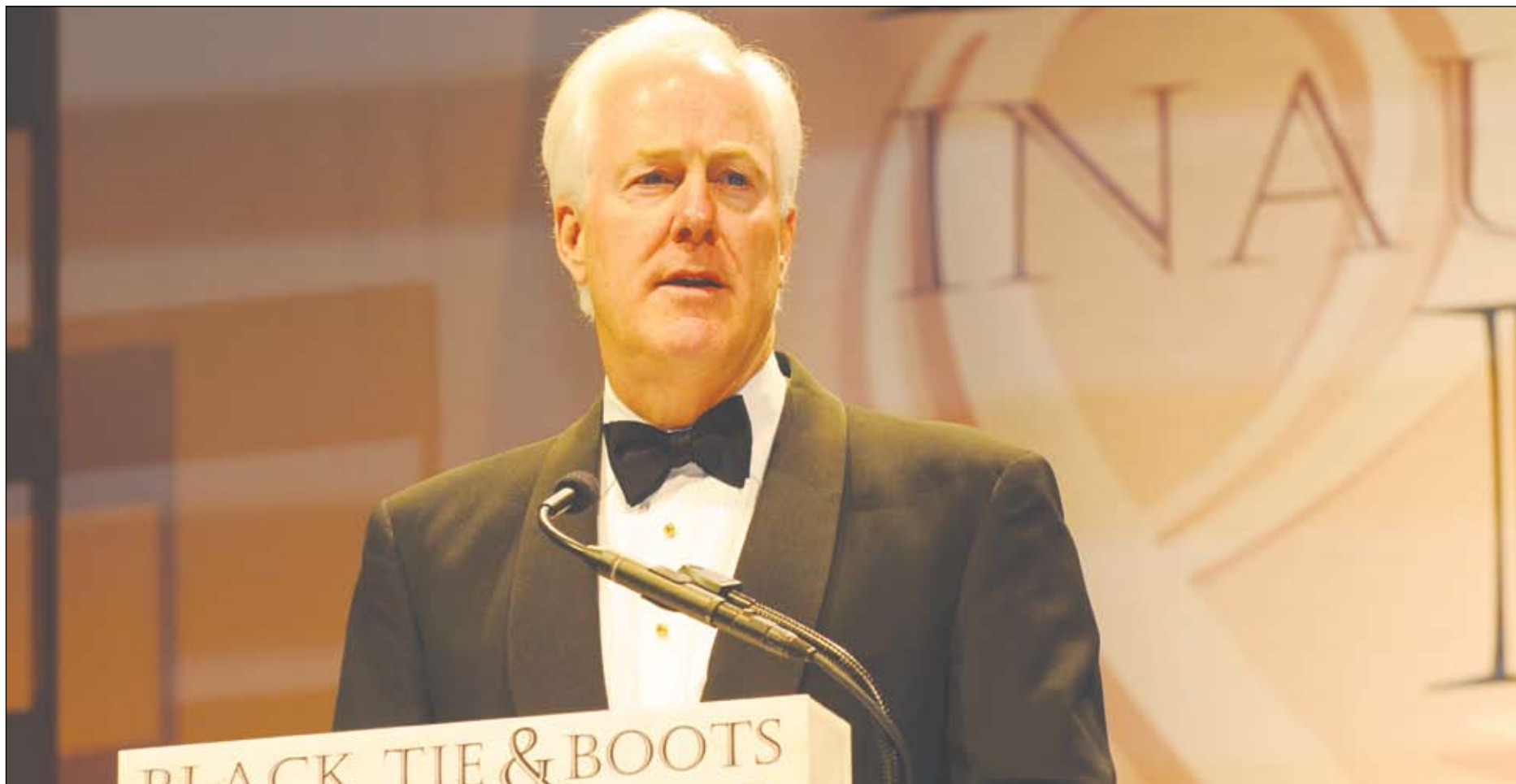


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PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE WEBSTER GROUP

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas), above, and actor Denzel Washington, below, both spoke at the Black Tie & Boots Inaugural Ball sponsored by the Texas State Society.

For Webster Group, Texas-sized success

By Rob Runyan

Hidden beneath the Starbucks, InkStop and UPS Store that line a three-story strip mall along MacArthur Boulevard in Northwest Washington, is an event-planning agency largely dedicated to helping nonprofits raise money.

It's a far cry from the The Webster Group's former home on K Street, but in many ways it's much more appropriate for its approach.

Founder and Chairwoman Lynda C. Webster said throwing thrifty but fun events that retain the focus on the primary goal of fundraising is what gives her company its appeal.

"I like to put more emphasis on getting the right people in the room for our clients than how lavish the flowers are going to be," Webster said.

That attitude is welcomed by penny-pinching organizations, especially since the economic downturn has tightened purse strings even more. Some clients have canceled events while others, including the government, have pulled back on the parties some were accustomed to in years past.

"I think a company coming into Washington and throwing a big, fancy party is asking for trouble these days," Webster said.

But that doesn't mean a firm can't have a successful event with a lot of people. The Webster Group proved

that Inauguration Week when they planned the Black Tie & Boots Inaugural Ball for the Texas State Society, always one of the most highly attended parties of the week.

Although they weren't celebrating a Texan in the White House like the last two Black Tie & Boots balls, over 11,000 partygoers still turned out to continue the tradition, according to Ed Perez, who chaired the event. It's a huge fundraiser for the Texas State Society and Webster's commitment to that cause was what set it apart when a number of event planners made a pitch for the project.

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Lynda C. Webster founder and chairwoman, The Webster Group

"They have staff members that are so professional," Perez said. "Ask them to do anything and in most cases they're already working on it."

The women-owned Webster Group and the Texas State Society might seem an odd fit, but Perez said gender was not important to them. If it was, Lynda Webster still believes she would have had an advantage.

"I grew up a tomboy so I can play both sides," she said.

Webster, 53, came to Washington after graduate school hoping to start a career in the CIA. But a failed health exam put an end to that and set her

down the private-sector path that eventually led to founding The Webster Group in 1995.

It has grown to more than 20 employees — just one male — with a client list that includes the U.S. Department of State, The Heritage Foundation and the Watergate Hotel. Webster estimates about 60 percent of her clients are nonprofit organizations.

"What differentiates us between most event planners in town is that many event planners do nonprofit events but they don't really specialize in them because there is frankly not a lot of money in it," she said. "But I didn't get in this business to make money."

She had chaired a number of events for nonprofits, but it was costing her and her husband too much money in contributions to stay involved. It was just after her husband, former FBI and CIA director William H. Webster, told her she couldn't keep doing the work pro bono when she received a first offer for a paid event-planning gig.

"I realized that I needed staff," Webster said. "So I got a half-time person then a full-time person and now we have 20-some people."

It may not be the career she envisioned in the CIA, but she has rectified that in other ways.

"In a kind of weird way I think God has a sense of humor," she said. "I end up marrying the director. I always say if you can't go in the front door then you go in the back door. So I eventually got into the CIA family."

