

writes for *The Nation* and produces video exposés of the Right. He looked over his shoulder at the young Republican women standing around and asked, “Shouldn’t they be dressed more modestly?” I laughed and said that the conservative movement doesn’t come from Amish country. Max offered his opinion of the way liberal women dress (not all that great) and pressed on about the short skirts and plunging necklines around us. By then, I wanted to get away. “I guess they are dressed for breeding,” I quipped—then immediately worried that he was videotaping me. That would never sound right. But Max had hit on something odd about CPAC.

Six feet from us hung a t-shirt that read “I only sleep with Republicans,” and two booths away Young Americans for Freedom featured an airbrushed poster of Ann Coulter in her best come-hither pose. The Young Britons’ Foundation didn’t have any Edmund Burke tracts, but they did have a poster of a sultry brunette, her lips parted slightly. The lascivious caption: “Life is better under a conservative.” Not to be outdone, banners at the Clare Booth Luce Policy Institute’s booth encouraged each young woman walking by to become “A Luce Lady.” CPAC’s many parties would provide ample opportunity.

The first night, a *Washington Times* editor rented a room and spread the word that he had \$1,500 worth of booze. The party was loud, and just a few moments after former congressman Bob Barr, leader of the House’s effort to impeach Bill Clinton, posed for a picture with his arms draped over two young women, the hotel shut down the festivities. The consensus opinion of the party: “Off the hook.”

The Maine College Republicans boasted on Facebook of their annual binge: “In just five years Mainefest has grown from a small hotel gathering to become one of Washington’s most

The increasingly unstable situation in Pakistan is now the principal topic at meetings of the National Security Council. There is apprehension that the Pakistani nuclear arsenal is vulnerable, a concern that the Indian government has shared privately with Washington. President Pervez Musharraf insists that the nuclear weapons are safe and that the only way militants could gain access to the devices would be if al-Qaeda or the Taliban “defeated the Pakistani army entirely” or if extremist religious groups won parliamentary elections. The Pentagon has been instructed by President Bush to develop a detailed operational plan for seizing Pakistan’s nuclear facilities should they fall into the hands of Islamic extremists.

A NSC proposal made at the end of 2007 to dispatch joint CIA/Special Forces into the Northwest territories to expand the search for al-Qaeda’s cadre and Osama bin Laden has been rejected by President Musharraf, who refuses to grant permission for American hot pursuit in border areas or even the establishment of passive U.S.-manned listening posts to identify terrorist concentrations. American intelligence has identified terrorist movements in both North and South Waziristan, the tribal regions where bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri are believed to be located, but the information has not been acted on because of difficulties in coordinating with the Pakistanis. During his most recent meetings with CIA Director Michael Hayden, Musharraf firmly stated his objection to having a CIA ground presence along the frontier, but said he would accept additional military training of his troops to improve their counterinsurgency capability. In other words, he would accept money and technology but no U.S. operational presence.

Musharraf, who has repeatedly denied that bin Laden is even in Pakistan, has committed large numbers of Pakistani army troops to the federally administered but *de facto* autonomous border region. He has focused on confronting Pakistani Taliban elements as well as rogue tribal leaders such as Baitullah Mehsud, who has challenged the Pakistani military directly by taking over several military bases and capturing several hundred frontier troops, sometimes beheading his captives to set an example. Musharraf has told U.S. intelligence officials privately that he is not focused on countering al-Qaeda because it is more of a threat inside Afghanistan and that the Pakistani fundamentalists and their tribal supporters are his major concern. But his weakness is revealed by the government’s inability to militarily confront and remove Mehsud, who was apparently involved in the Bhutto assassination and is closely linked to al-Qaeda. Musharraf’s position has frustrated senior U.S. officials who observe that the tribesmen and al-Qaeda are often allied, that the Pakistani military is inefficient and in some cases incompetent, and that the Musharraf policy is inexorably losing what little control the central government has along the frontier. The consequence is that both al-Qaeda and the Taliban continue to grow stronger. The Afghan Taliban are known to be preparing a major offensive against the Hamid Karzai government in Kabul in the spring, and the threat to Musharraf’s rule continues to grow.

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highly anticipated social events of the year.” It’s not quite the Gridiron Dinner, but the parties seem to please the attendees. Washington’s free-market think tanks and lobbying outfits suffer from a lack of females, and college Republican groups contain a surfeit of attractive women looking for America’s future lawyers. Besides, the men in college Republican groups are unavailable and undesirable—their romantic attention entirely fixed on Ayn Rand.

Not everyone came for the parties. Outside the main ballroom, angry CPACers waved “Republicans Against McCain” protest signs. Another cluster held up a “McCain = Amnesty” banner. Libertarian activists claimed that registrations at their booth spiked as soon as Romney announced the suspension of his campaign.

Ron Paul, under whose standard most dissenters rallied, gave one of the sharpest speeches of his campaign. The only featured speaker to attack John McCain, Paul asked the audience to consider that the presumptive nominee had allied with Tom Daschle on tax policy, with Russ Feingold on campaign finance, with Al Gore on global warming, and with Ted Kennedy on immigration. He did not shy away from his differences with the movement on the war on terror: “Osama bin Laden loves our foreign policy.” Donald Devine, second vice chairman of The American Conservative Union, moved slowly to the back of the room, asking if the people there supported Paul. With a sigh, he admitted that he, too, would probably vote for him. It was a stunning admission from one of CPAC’s founders.

But the organizers know better than to let their conference devolve into dissent. Newt Gingrich was called in as the closer. His speech contained his familiar chorus of absurd statistics: “85 percent of American people believe we have an obligation to protect America and her allies, 75 percent believe we have obligation to defeat our enemies.” Apparently Democrats

believe that America’s enemies should pilage Kansas City next week.

At one moment Gingrich seemed to echo the dissident voices heard in break-away sessions: it is essential for “the conservative movement ... to declare itself independent from the Republican Party.” But that doesn’t mean starting a new party or even sitting out an election. Gingrich continued, “Any reasonable conservative will—in the end—find they have an absolute requirement to support the Republican nominee for president this fall.” Apparently political independence from Republicans still implies an absolute requirement to vote for them.

Gingrich was acting according to the logic of CPAC. Founded to pull the country and the Republican Party to the right, the conference is now so well established and so reliant on the appearance of big-name politicians for its success (measured in number of attendees and media buzz) that it has become the place where conservatives reconcile themselves to voting Republican no matter what. Tempted though they may be to punish the GOP for its transgressions, each year Raymond Aron’s dictum prevails: “In politics, the choice is not between good and evil, but between the preferable and the detestable.” Of course this gives incredible license to “the preferable” to act detestably. If a movement believes that its opponents are the communist caricatures depicted on CPAC t-shirts, it can convince itself to throw in with McCain. By the end of Gingrich’s speech, morale had been lifted and attendees had their bags stuffed with all the trinkets they could carry.

The bullying bumper stickers, the man in the dolphin outfit, and the best-sellers by radio personalities are all the result of conservatives turning toward movement politics. It is tempting to sniff at the CPAC crowd—many of whom claim to be conservatives but cannot tell

the difference between Russell Kirk and Captain Kirk. But that would be wrong.

Moving from ideas to policy advocacy and finally to governance requires building an electoral coalition that will, by its very nature, simplify subtle reflections into campaign slogans. When William F. Buckley tied himself, and by extension *National Review*, to the cause of Joe McCarthy, the conservative intellectual movement was married to a populist base. In his 1992 Republican convention speech, Pat Buchanan spoke of a great class of voters: “They don’t read Adam Smith or Edmund Burke, but they came from the same schoolyards and playgrounds and towns as we did. They share our beliefs and convictions, our hopes and our dreams. They are the conservatives of the heart.” Many of them are now at CPAC—and that’s part of the problem.

The conference flattens the political passions of these conservatives, channeling their energy into national politics and away from local concerns. Thus the range of activism narrows to immigration, foreign policy, and the solipsistic goal of sustaining the conservative movement itself. This is good for keeping Beltway institutions well funded but bad for the actual work of conservatism.

As the Omni Shoreham’s staff disassembled the exhibit hall, the young Republicans repaired to Capitol Hill for the last party of the weekend, Reaganpalooza, where organizers urged everyone to “Drink one for the Gipper.” A handful of anti-McCainiacs ordered stiff shots and argued over whether they could vote Republican in the fall. “It’s an anti-Obama vote, that’s all,” one offered. “But on immigration, McCain is against us. And on the war he’s against public opinion,” said another. But soon enough they swallowed their doubts and began dancing to the music, determined to celebrate a president who left office before some of them were born. The band never stopped playing on the Titanic either. ■

Bridge to Nowhere

When John F. Kennedy ran for president in 1960, he talked of a new generation of Americans taking charge, of heading out bravely for a New Frontier. He did not

call up the shades of FDR or Harry Truman or go back 45 years to Woodrow Wilson.

The same was true of Ronald Reagan in 1980. He offered a vision of a grand future where America would become again, after the malaise of the Carter era, a “shining city on a hill.” There was no hearkening back by Reagan to the great days of Ike.

Whatever their flaws and failings, both were charismatic and inspirational leaders, looking ahead in anticipation of heroic battles to be won and great deeds to be done. Yet in both parties today, the presidential candidates seem to feel a need to identify with and connect themselves to what are now the legendary leaders and causes of yesteryear.

For Democrats, it is JFK and Robert Kennedy. For Republicans, it is Reagan, which must frost the Bushes, who, between them, will have served four years longer than the Gipper, who departed almost 20 years ago.

For George H.W. Bush, it must be especially galling. For he presided over the fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification of Germany, the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the first Gulf War and the liberation of Kuwait. Epochal events.

And, clearly, Bill Clinton was more than a little upset to hear Barack Obama talk of the Republican Party of the '90s as the party of ideas and of Reagan as a transformational figure—unlike Bill Clinton. Indeed, it says something about the Democratic Party today that to reach its heroes—JFK, RFK, Dr. King—

it must go back 40 years and pass over three presidents, Clinton, Carter, and LBJ, who served 17 years. And Robert Kennedy never even made it and was a presidential candidate for less than three months.

This invocation of the ghosts of the past seems to testify to a sense of inadequacy on the part of today's candidates, a need to reconnect to the party base, to insert themselves in a great tradition—rather than establish a new, separate identity—and to a belief that the years since Reagan have not been times of greatness in America.

Since our victory in the Cold War, we seem not to have lived in heroic times. After all, invading Panama and Haiti, bombing Serbia, and crushing Saddam twice is not quite the same as taking the measure of the Evil Empire or prevailing in the Cuban missile crisis.

As for the war against “Islamofascism,” it pales beside the war against the real fascists of the 20th century: the Japanese Empire and Hitler's Reich, which, in two years, conquered Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hosting David Duke at a Holocaust conference doesn't quite cut it.

For Democrats the problem seems most acute. After all, JFK has been dead 44 years. No one under 50 has any memory of his presidency. While his daughter has grown up to be a lovely woman, how many young people even know who Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg is? And other than his assassination that terrible day in Dallas and the Cuban missile crisis, which they learned about

in school, what do the people of America under 50 even know about JFK? There was the Bay of Pigs, the space program, and Jackie and her glamour. The film clips of JFK standing before the Berlin Wall declaring “Ich bin ein Berliner” are often shown, but few commentators mention that the wall went up on JFK's watch and he did zip about it. And since JFK, we have had LBJ, the Great Society, Vietnam, Nixon and China, Watergate, the Ford-Carter interlude, the Reagan era and two decades of Bush-Clinton-Bush.

Alone among the candidates, Obama seems to want to become a leader in the JFK-Reagan mold. His problem: he has no great cause like the Cold War or civil rights revolution and no great adversary as a foil.

Universal health care may be important. It is also a crashing bore, as that wonkish Democratic debate demonstrated. And didn't LBJ already do the heavy lifting on Medicare, Medicaid, and civil rights?

Democrats' problem is that they are the party of government, when, after Katrina, no one really believes in government anymore, except perhaps the military.

John McCain, now identifying himself as a “foot soldier in the Reagan revolution” is casting himself in a heroic posture as a Churchill who will “never surrender” and lead us to victory in the war against Islamofascism. But the American people now believe the war in Iraq was a mistake and want out, if only we can avoid a defeat or a bloody debacle.

Perhaps the candidates are hearkening back to yesterday because they know the American people are unhappy with today, and Barack's followers aside, are not looking forward to tomorrow with any anticipation of great days ahead under either party. ■