

Party Crashing

A paleo's-eye view at the Star Trek convention of the American Right

By Marcus Epstein

AFTER SHOWING the federal security guards my driver's license, I walked through the metal detector. Beep! Between my suit and overcoat, I must have had over a dozen pockets, and I didn't feel like figuring out which one held my change, so they scanned my jacket and I walked through again. This time I made it without trouble, but there were still old ladies waiting for security guards to pass wands over them to make sure they weren't hiding knives beneath their broaches.

No, I was not getting aboard an airplane but entering the 32nd annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). With the exclusion of the year I was abroad, I have made the three-hour drive from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, where I am now a senior, to the conference every year of college. In the past, it was held at a hotel in Crystal City, Virginia, but this year it took place at the Reagan Building in Washington, D.C.

In many ways this is appropriate; a giant federal building next door to the headquarters of the IRS is an ironic comment on conservatives who have made peace with big government. The guards and metal detectors represent the movement's main passion, the national-security state. And the fact that the only reason they decided to move it is because the building is named after Ronald Reagan suggests attendees' primary preoccupation: putting a simulacrum of our 40th president on everything from the \$10 bill to Mt. Rushmore. A number of people at the conference

were wearing shirts and hats that piously stated, "God, Reagan, Bush."

CPAC, sponsored by the American Conservative Union (ACU), is the largest gathering of conservative activists in the country. Neoconservative Marshall Wittmann derisively calls it the Star Trek convention for conservatives. While I have never been to a Star Trek convention (really!), from my second-hand impressions, this description is apt. Several dozen conservative organizations and a few vendors set up booths where would-be inductees can learn about the various groups, sign up for their mailing lists, and buy their products. Simultaneously, conservative activists, politicians, and intellectuals give speeches to a fawning audience around the clock.

The major attractions this year were Vice President Cheney, Karl Rove, several senators, Ann Coulter, and Newt Gingrich. I will confess that I didn't listen to most of their speeches; I knew what to expect. I walked into Miss Coulter's speech halfway through and within 15 seconds I heard her utter "there's a difference between free speech and treason" and promptly exited. This is not to say that ACU did not manage to find some interesting speakers, though *American Conservative* editors Patrick Buchanan and Philip Giraldi were not given the opportunity to talk directly about foreign policy. Former Congressman Bob Barr gave a passionate speech against invasions of civil liberties in the post-9/11 era, and a very thoughtful debate was held on immigration policy

with Phyllis Schlafly and Numbers USA's Roy Beck debating Tamar Jacoby and Stephen Moore.

The only antiwar voice that got a chance to speak directly against the administration's foreign policy was the venerable John Basil Utley of Conservatives for Peace. Mr. Utley was given a mere three minutes on a 10-man panel, and I heard several people cough obscenities about him as he spoke. He undoubtedly received the coolest response of any of the speakers.

I spent several hours at the Conservatives for Peace booth. The group is an offshoot of Americans Against World Empire, which was started by antiwar conservatives and libertarians during the first Gulf War. They had copies of Ivan Eland's *The Empire Has No Clothes*, this magazine, *Sobran's*, and various articles by Paul Craig Roberts, Charley Reese, Pat Buchanan, and others. While a few well-known antiwar libertarians such as Dr. Eland and James Bovard stopped by with words of support, the most common response from attendees was to call the people manning the table leftists, unpatriotic, or communists. The last accusation is especially ironic as Mr. Utley was an outspoken Cold Warrior and is the son of the great anticommunist Freda Utley.

While the Conservatives for Peace booth was not very popular, an outfit selling "Freedom Gear" was. Their tasteful t-shirts included one with a likeness of an Abrams tank and the words "Iraqi Roadkill Is What's For Dinner." Another had a Frenchman waving a white flag

and the words, “We Salute You.” When the vendor asked me if I would like to buy the shirt, I told him that I didn’t think the French were cowardly. He snapped back that they quickly negotiated peace in World War II and would not let us use their airfields during our latest war. I explained to him that 1.3 million French died in World War I, more than all American war deaths in history, and since over 100,000 died during World War II, their reluctance to fight is understandable. I also asked how he would like it if the French wanted to put troops in America. The response I got from the several people who had gathered around was, “What are you, a Democrat?” This apparently meant communist because they also sold shirts that said, “What Blue States? All I see is Red” with hammers and sickles strewn across the West Coast, Northeast, and Upper Midwest.

It seems that what I thought was just a “two minute hate” against the French and other pet enemies of the Right has now become over two years of hate. At a cocktail party sponsored by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, I had joked with a fellow young conservative that I was glad when the Dixie Chicks were boycotted by country radio for criticizing President Bush—not because of their politics but because I didn’t like their music. She told me that they were her favorite band, but she destroyed all their records and still doesn’t listen to them. She said she didn’t like country musicians who shoved their politics down the fans’ throats. Apparently this didn’t apply to Toby Keith, Darryl Worley, Montgomery Gentry, or the other country artists who supported the war much more actively than the Dixie Chicks opposed it.

One of the most interesting things I noted was the burgeoning movement to draft Condoleezza Rice to run for president in 2008. When I talked to a few people wearing “Draft Condi” buttons to

find out why they thought she should become president, the only answers I got were that she was intelligent and supported the president. All of them denied that they wanted her to run because she was a black female, but they did not question that this fact had its political utility. My initial response was that her race and sex were unlikely to gain points from the professional anti-racists or even from minority and women voters. I learned, however, that the main reason they thought her race was useful was not because she would deflect accusations of racism (not that they didn’t entertain the possibility), but because it could help expose left-wing racism—whatever that means.

Secretary Rice may be quite conservative, but the only thing I knew about her was that she was willing to lie to help the president go to war and that she supports affirmative action. A few weeks after the conference, I read that she is also pro-choice. If she turns out to be pro-gay marriage and for increasing federal spending, as well, I doubt it will do

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much to deflect conservative enthusiasm for her. Supporting George W. Bush and whatever wars he decides to fight seems to be only litmus test.

In fact, if one thing was apparent from CPAC, it is that foreign policy has become the defining issue for the Right, and anyone who opposes endless war will be derided as a liberal, anti-American, or worse. This is done at the expense of all domestic concerns—both social and economic. Although *New York Post* editor Ryan Sager complained that open-borders advocates

and supporters of homosexual marriage were not greeted with unqualified acceptance at CPAC, they were both treated with much more respect than anyone who opposed the war. That people like Rudy Giuliani and Arnold Schwarzenegger are hailed as conservative heroes shows that many conservatives are willing to sacrifice almost any principle for electoral success and war.

Another general observation was that college students are much more likely to be unyielding Bush loyalists than older conservatives. I talked to numerous people who were in their mid-twenties to early thirties who agreed with me on many issues like immigration and foreign policy. The president and vice president of the ACU, David Keene and Donald Devine, have both expressed skepticism of the neoconservatives, blind support for President Bush, and our current foreign adventures. While they may bite their tongues to ensure that they can get big-name politicians to speak at their events—Mr. Devine was nearly fired for being insufficiently enthusiastic about

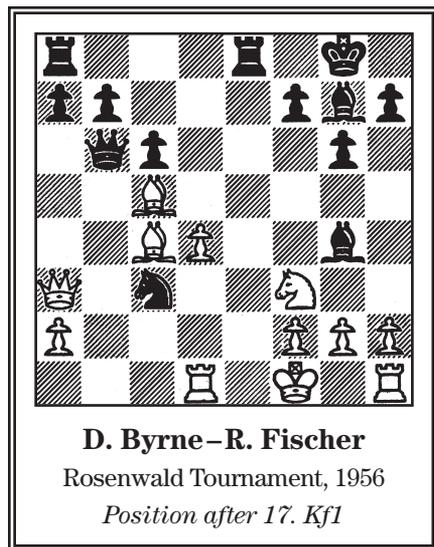
President Bush’s address to the ACU last year—and neoconservative foundation money, they at least remember a conservative movement that used to stand for limited government and a national-interest foreign policy.

But most college students, who came of age as conservatives in the post-9/11 world, identify conservatism as support for the war in Iraq and President Bush. Russell Kirk, Ludwig von Mises, and Richard Weaver, if they have even heard of them, are seen as thoughtful but irrelevant—and certainly not as fun as

having David Horowitz and Ann Coulter tell you how to accuse your professors of treason.

Sam Francis, who died a few days before the conference, spent the last 15 years explaining why the conservative movement has been a failure. From the mood of most of the attendees at CPAC, you would not get that impression. Rather, they were exuberant, triumphalist. Republicans control both houses of Congress, the presidency, and the majority of the governorships across the country. Fox News and the Internet give the Right a voice alongside the traditionally liberal print and television media. But what very few would admit, or even care about, is that government is still getting bigger, abortion is no closer to being banned than it was 20 years ago, homosexual marriage seems to be inevitable, and immigration is inundating our country at unprecedented rates. If electing Republicans and waging wars is the gauge, then the movement has been a gleaming success. But if that becomes conservatism's *raison d'être*, we can pray for nothing more than its failure. ■

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The Knock on the Door

The War on Terror comes home—to a veteran in Iowa.

By **Dave Lindorff**

THE POST 9/11 ERA has accelerated a trend not just toward pressure on First Amendment freedoms but toward proactive attacks on free-speech rights. Formerly sleepy federal agencies with police functions have been folded into the new Department of Homeland Security, where the focus is the so-called War on Terror. That militant mentality, coupled with unprecedented approval for pre-emptive action, threatens to create a new class of potential terrorists among our own citizens.

Meet Kenneth Tennant, a 46-year-old disabled Army veteran who learned that expressing frustrations to the Veterans Administration can mean an early morning knock on the door, arrest at the hands of Homeland Security agents, and a night in the can.

Tennant left the Army in 1989 with a disabling disease called fibromyalgia, reminiscent of Gulf War syndrome. (He attributes it to vaccines administered to him as a combat medic trainee). His disease causes joint and muscle problems and a general malaise, determined by the VA back in 1995 to be service-connected, though Tennant was classified as just 10 percent disabled. As his ailment progressed, it became hard for him to work full time, and he pressed to be reclassified as more severely disabled. After battling the VA for nearly a decade, in 2003 he finally won a ruling declaring him to be 40 percent disabled. But Tennant wasn't satisfied. He felt the ruling should be retroactive, at least as far back 1995.

For the past three years, the frustrated Bettendorf, Iowa resident and part-time chiropractor did verbal battle with the regional office of the VA in Des Moines, making phone calls to officials and sending letters—sometimes even to officials' homes if he could locate them (and in one case to a VA employee's spouse).

Last August, he apparently sent one too many sets of letters—this time a photocopied flier that featured an image of a finger-pointing Uncle Sam saying, "I lied about Vets benefits ..." followed by a list of charges linking the VA and the military to a spate of diseases allegedly caused by vaccines.

Over the next several weeks, Tennant was contacted multiple times by Steven Familo, an agent of the Federal Protective Service, an agency that formerly was part of the General Services Administration charged with protecting federal property but which is now part of Homeland Security. Familo warned Tennant he was being investigated.

Then on Nov. 5, 2004, at 8:15 in the morning, Tennant heard a banging on the door of his home and opened it to find Familo, another FPS agent, and two local Bettendorf police officers on the porch demanding that he "step outside." They told him that he was under arrest. With his six- and eight-year-old children crying inside and his wife throwing up in distress, he says federal agents ordered him to put his hands on his head and then to bend over—a painful exercise for him with his disease. "They were