

Auditioning Reagans

The GOP presidential contenders make their case for the Right's affection.

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

AS CONSERVATIVE movement hands—old survivors and college Republicans—registered at the Conservative Political Action Conference, it was clear that Mitt Romney had turned this annual confab into a mini-convention. Around each corner of the labyrinthine first floor of the Omni Shoreham were dark haired, bright-eyed beauties handing out “Mitt ’08” stickers, and waving blue signs. The Romney campaign helped over 200 College Republicans attend.

Yet for every Romney action there was an equal and opposite reaction. In the tradition of anti-Kerry kitsch, volunteers passed out neon orange and yellow flip-flops with Romney’s name on them, and a man dressed as “Flipper” the dolphin walked around telling anyone who had ears to hear, the truth about Romney.

The youthful rally atmosphere was punctured early and often by notes of distress and despair. Before lunch on the first day, Richard Viguerie, the king of New Right activism and direct-mail fundraising, railed against the corruption of Republicans who “spend and spend and spend our children and grandchildren’s inheritance all for the sole immoral, corrupt purpose of holding onto power.” Viguerie challenged those present to withhold all financial support from the RNC and from the top-tier candidates he deems insufficiently conservative, Rudy Giuliani, John McCain, and Mitt Romney.

As top CPAC donors lined up in front of Secret Service members and metal detectors to hear the vice president, the Leadership Institute gathered two-party malcontents into an unscheduled event.

Rep. Ron Paul’s speech left no part of the federal government unscathed. His soothing Presbyterian lilt couldn’t disguise the radical nature of his message. “The Constitution says you can only mint currency from gold and silver, so I don’t even believe in the Federal Reserve,” he said, almost as if he were explaining basic arithmetic to a first grader. But the crowd seemed to understand that this man was calling for a revolution. They whooped, cheered, and begged him to announce his candidacy for president. Paul kept his cool, and disappeared for the rest of the conference.

After such a strong dose of libertarian tonic, Tom Tancredo sauntered in to inform his supporters that he had just put out an excellent Romeo y Julieta cigar to be there. His tone suggested that he had forgiven the crowd for the offense. He gave an extemporaneous speech on the cult of multiculturalism and the coming difficulties in stopping the passage of amnesty. The fresh-faced troops leaned into his every word. If he had asked them to burn down the building, there is no doubt the Omni would have been consumed by flames within an hour. But Tancredo just wanted another cigar. As he exited the building, a group of young, tough-minded organizers approached him. “Congressman, we have a lot of good people in South Carolina, but the Brownback guys are snapping up a lot of people too. What are you going to do?”

“We can’t compete with \$100 million campaigns,” he replied, “We’ll just do what we can and put the rest in God’s hands. That’s all we can do.” The slightly

dejected entourage walked slowly to the hotel lobby to make party plans for the night.

Tancredo returned the next day to speak from the main stage. To a crowd wearing stickers with a line through “Rudy McRomney,” he denounced not only “hyphenated Americans” but also hyphenated conservatives—“Neos on one side, paleos on the other. Compassionate conservatives here and now common-sense conservatives.” For Tancredo, these ideological deformations had only given us tax increases, entitlement expansions, and Nancy Pelosi as speaker of the House. “Conservatism doesn’t need an adjective, it needs a leader,” he thundered. Calling on conservatives to examine closely those who would court them, he aimed his rhetorical arrows at Romney: “conversions happen on the road to Damascus, not on the road to Des Moines.”

While candidates like Duncan Hunter and Mike Huckabee were received warmly on day two, Rudy was the big-ticket item. Lines to get in stretched through the hallways. Inside, the foot soldiers of the movement crowded in with the elite—imposing men with Confederate flag lapel pins next to David Brooks, fresh from filing his weekend column, and Terry Eastland, publisher of *The Weekly Standard*. As Giuliani entered stage right, hundreds of cell phones held aloft snapped grainy pictures of America’s mayor.

Rudy came prepared. Acknowledging his differences with the crowd on social issues, he intoned, “We agree on 80 percent, disagree on the other 20 percent. I

think I just described your relationship to your husband or your wife.” He moved swiftly to less divisive themes: it’s not “our war on terror, it’s *their* war on us.” A woman in a red pantsuit shook in her seat and exclaimed, “Fabulous!”

He spoke from notes and struck a professorial tone, explaining how he reduced crime in New York not only by implementing innovative policing tactics but by slashing the welfare rolls. He strolled off the stage to a standing ovation and the bulging base line of “New York, New York.”

The crowd had thinned by the time Sam Brownback took the podium, addressing the conference with the gravity and reassuring hand gestures of a group Bible study. Heavy on themes of “righteousness and justice,” it was stump speech as catechism class, and it came out as tough and flat as that

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sounds. Borrowing heavily from the British, Brownback placed himself in the tradition of William Wilberforce, the member of Parliament whose Christianity inspired him to end the slave trade, and appropriated the rhetoric of Tony Blair’s post 9/11 speech, saying “America is great because she is good.” Having the most impeccable pro-life credentials in the room counted for a lot and won him third place in the straw poll.

Mitt Romney entered a room full of anticipation. His wife Anne’s presence was no accident. In her bright floral dress, she was warm, accessible, and just plump enough to be all American (unlike, say, Teresa Heinz Kerry). She noted that the Romneys are celebrating their 38th anniversary in a very happy marriage (unlike serial-divorcés Giuliani and Gingrich). With his broad,

focus-grouped smile and his torso swiveling to catch the teleprompters, Romney touted his ability to fight liberal legislators, saying, “I know how to veto” (unlike Bush). With the demeanor of a Little League coach, he tapped each conservative constituency on the head. Defending marriage, making America secure, balanced budgets, border control. After detailing his successes in business, he gave an “aw shucks” twist to his smile, and says, “Frankly I can’t wait to get my hands on Washington.” There isn’t a soul that doubts him.

As reporters hustled out to get the big Romney applause lines filed from the nearest wi-fi connection, blond bombthrower Ann Coulter took the stage. Over the strains of “Don’t Stop Believin’” at the nearby Romney reception, I got the news that would become the big story out of CPAC 2007. “Ohmigod!”

shouted a wire reporter, “Ann Coulter just called John Edwards...” She showed me her Blackberry, with the word “faggot” highlighted in the news story. We realized that while she and I were reporting the event, nearly every blogger had already heard this story and given their opinion in the past 20 minutes. We were across the hall and therefore worlds behind the news cycle.

But by that point only the nerdiest student attendees even cared about the candidates anymore. Every properly informed student (excepting Romney’s teetotaling Mormon contingent) was getting ready for Mainefest at Adams Mill Bar—a “legendary event” according to Jane Heeves, a junior at the University of Maine. Lucky for the students, the bouncer seemed unable to identify the ages on drivers licenses far beyond the

D.C. area. With a little hip hop and a lot of alcohol, none of the Mainers would wake in time to see Sean Hannity the next morning.

“Where do we stand?” was the question used to introduce the CPAC straw poll results. Though he bussed in nearly 10 percent of the vote, Romney only beat Giuliani by four points. In a combined vote of first and second choice, Giuliani beat Romney by four points and tied with Newt Gingrich. Hypothetically, would attendees choose a self-described Ronald Reagan Republican or a George W. Bush Republican? Only 3 percent chose Bush. “Sorry Mr. President, this movement is still Ronald Reagan’s,” said Tony Fabrizio. Whenever McCain’s name was uttered across the ballroom, it was followed by boos and hissing. He still managed a fifth-place finish at 12 percent.

Newt Gingrich, perhaps the biggest winner of the day, closed the conference. All the announced candidates had entered from backstage, but Newt came in through the back of the ballroom, shaking hands with supporters as if he were president of CPAC itself. His standing ovation lasted several minutes through the strains of “America the Beautiful,” and the temperature in the room rose swiftly. He came bearing “big concepts, big values, and big solutions.” But like most of the conference speeches, he didn’t dwell on the war in Iraq or the record of the current administration. Conservatism existed with Ronald Reagan, and according to each presidential aspirant, it will be revived under their leadership. His normally helmet-like hair tousled, his face redder than ever, Newt easily whipped up the spirits of the tired crowd.

As the doors were opened after his speech, the young Republicans spilled out with sweat on their brows, searching for spring air and directions to the next party, because this one was over. ■

Obama's Identity Crisis

Although he presents himself as a healer of differences, the presidential candidate's own racial struggle paints a conflicted portrait.

By Steve Sailer

WHEN CHARLES DE GAULLE paid his first visit to embattled French Algeria after taking power in 1958, he stepped up to the microphone in front of a vast throng of Europeans and Arabs torn by murderous hostilities, stared out at them, and simply announced, "I have understood you." The crowd exulted. Christians and Muslims alike broke into grateful tears. De Gaulle understands us! What more do we need?

Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) has yet to attain that level of oracular ambiguity, but his bestseller *The Audacity of Hope* shows this wordsmith's facility at eloquently restating the views of both his liberal supporters and his conservative opponents, leaving implicit the suggestion that all we require to resolve these wearying Washington disputes is to find a man who understands us—a reasonable man, a man very much like, say, Obama—and turn power over to him. The politician has elicited such fervor among many white voters that *Slate.com*'s Timothy Noah runs a regular feature entitled "The Obama Messiah Watch" quoting "gratuitously adoring" articles. (Blacks have tended to be relatively more level-headed about him.)

Early in his run for the U.S. Senate in 2004, Obama's pollsters discovered that women loved him, especially nice white ladies who like personalities more than politics and definitely don't like political arguments. Why can't we all just get along?

Obama has molded himself into the male Oprah Winfrey, the crown prince of

niceness, bravely denouncing divisiveness, condemning controversy, eulogizing unity, and retelling his feel-good life story about how he, the child of a black scholar from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas, grew up to be editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.

Gaullism worked out fairly well in France, and so might Obamaism in America. His opposition in 2002 to invading Iraq was sensible and forcibly stated. And Obama was a broadly respected Illinois state legislator from 1997-2005 because he searched out minor good government issues and forged bipartisan alliances with technocrats in the Republican ranks. But a president can't pick and choose his issues with the exquisite selectivity Obama displayed as a backbencher—especially not with judicial nominees. So his record as chief executive would likely prove far more liberal.

As we've seen with George W. Bush, however, pre-election platforms, such as Bush's promise to pursue a "humble" foreign policy, matter less than the inner man. Obama is a particularly complicated personality, so he, and the country, deserve a more frank analysis than he has received thus far at the hands of a starstruck press.

Beneath this bland Good Obama lies a more interesting character, one that I like far better—the Bad Obama, a close student of other people's weaknesses, a literary artist of considerable power in plumbing his deep reservoirs of self-pity and resentment, an unfunny Evelyn Waugh consumed by indignation toward

his own mother's people. He has been hiding out on the bestseller lists for the last two years in his enormously revealing, but little understood, 1995 "autobiography"—a more accurate term might be "autobiographical novel"—*Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*.

When Obama briefly surfaced in the media in 1990 as the first African-American editor of the *Harvard Law Review*, Random House handed him a book contract. Originally, he intended to write a disquisition on race relations, but the puerility of his theorizing discouraged him. He turned instead to writing about what he finds truly fascinating: his relatives and himself.

Obama's gift for restructuring the past into emotionally and aesthetically satisfying patterns made for an uneasy hybrid of fact and fiction, with composite characters, clearly made-up dialogue, and even preposterous dream sequences. Recently, the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that the tale of his one triumph during his four years as a young ethnic activist in Chicago—getting asbestos removed from a public housing project—excluded all mention of the veteran local agitator, Hazel Johnson, who might deserve more of the credit.

Nonetheless, *Dreams* is an impressive book. The abstract lessons he claims to draw from his life aren't memorable, sapped as they are by the pervasive insincerity about race that America demands of its intellectuals, but Obama has a depressive's fine eye for