

Grand Old Party

High spirits and low expectations at CPAC

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

AT LAST YEAR'S Conservative Political Action Conference, a man in a dolphin suit stood outside the Omni Shoreham Hotel mocking Mitt Romney's flip-flopping on abortion, the Reagan presidency, and other issues dear to conservative hearts. Attendees loved him. This year, Flipper stood by himself in a hallway, his dorsal fin drooping, his plush head hanging—a year's worth of wear and tear. With John McCain on the verge of winning the Republican nomination, few of the conservatives at CPAC wanted to joke about Romney, in whom they had of late placed their hopes. And within a few hours of the start of the conference, both Romney and Flipper would need to find new lines of work.

The former Massachusetts governor was introduced by Laura Ingraham, who, clueless of the drama to come, waxed on about Romney as the “conservative's conservative” while enthusiastic supporters waved foam “Mitts.” With trademark efficiency, he delivered a speech that served red meat with the regularity and forced sincerity of a Denny's waitress. On welfare and regulation, Romney said, “Dependency is culture killing.” On family, he declared that the development of a child is “enhanced” by having a mother and father. “I wonder how it is that unelected judges, like some in my state of Massachusetts, are so unaware of this reality,” he mused.

He compared his run against McCain to Reagan's campaign against the moderate Ford, but then declared that one issue trumped everything, even his own presidential ambitions: “There is an important

difference from 1976. Today we are a nation at war.” He explained that by fighting on to the convention, he would “forestall the launch of a national campaign and, frankly, I'd make it easier for Senator Clinton or Obama to win. ... I simply cannot let my campaign be a part of aiding a surrender to terror.” As disappointed fans filed out, organizers hauled out the campaign debris. Exit Romney faithful, enter McCainiacs. The transition took mere minutes.

Well aware that CPAC wasn't a natural constituency, McCain's campaign had loaded a double-barreled introduction: former Virginia senator George Allen, who but for three unfortunate syllables might have been in McCain's place, and Tom Coburn, arguably the Senate's most conservative member.

His credentials polished, McCain entered to orchestrated applause—the string of speakers preceding him had urged the crowd to mind its manners—and struck as conciliatory a tone as an old maverick can muster. “Many of you have disagreed strongly with some positions I have taken in recent years,” he said. “I understand that. ... And it is my sincere hope that even if you believe I have occasionally erred in my reasoning as a fellow conservative, you will still allow that I have, in many ways important to all of us, maintained the record of a conservative.”

The reaction was mixed. The author of last year's wildly unpopular “comprehensive immigration reform” was roundly booed when he broached the subject of America's borders. But he knew how to win the audience back: “Whomever the Democrats nominate,

they would govern this country in a way that will, in my opinion, take this country backward to the days when government felt empowered to take from us our freedom to decide for ourselves the course and quality of our lives.” (Within the same paragraph, McCain inadvertently demonstrated the contradictions between the old Republican palaver about freedom and the demands of the war on terror saying, “It is shameful and dangerous that Senate Democrats are blocking an extension of surveillance powers.” No line got louder applause.)

McCain may not have sealed the deal, but he got his foot in the door. Blogging for *National Review*, Stanley Kurtz wrote, “I thought McCain did an excellent job ... he won over most of the crowd.”

While the establishment was upstairs coalescing around its unlikely champion, the full spectrum of the conservative grassroots was on display in the downstairs exhibition hall. Where else to buy an “I'd rather be water-boarded than vote for McCain” t-shirt? Other conservative couture featured a picture of a bricklayer constructing a wall: “If you build it, they won't come.” (One wonders what the Hondurans who make these shirts think of the Americans who buy them.) A generation after the Berlin Wall fell, red-baiting is still in vogue: one activist sold t-shirts with the figure of Vladimir Lenin bestriding an American university; another offered bottles of Lenin-ade and ushankas with hammer and sickle insignia and Clinton or Obama's name.

Wandering among the dealers, Max Blumenthal greeted me. Son of former Clinton aide Sidney Blumenthal, Max

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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