

# Rush to Judgment

The backlash against McCain reveals signs of life in the conservative movement.

By Richard B. Spencer

AS THE REPUBLICAN nomination process lumbered along for more than a year, the collection of publications, institutions, and media personalities known as the “conservative movement” found itself in a state of a dissatisfied stability. All potential frontrunners provoked some kind of displeasure, sometimes alarm. But even Rudy Giuliani’s agnosticism on *Roe* and Ron Paul’s disruption of the pro-war consensus were problems soon enough dissolved.

Then John McCain emerged as the establishment candidate, and something happened. From the conservative base—as channeled through its talk-radio and FOX News representatives—a ferocious backlash began. It was a beast that threatened to rip the senator limb from limb. Indeed, to tear apart the entire Republican coalition and feed the scraps to the Democrats.

As early as January, talk-radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh and Mark Levin started voicing disapproval of McCain as a potential nominee. Syndicated columnists, FOX celebrities like Ann Coulter and Michelle Malkin, and many at conservative-movement house organs like *National Review* and *Human Events* began targeting the senator.

By mid-February, the revolt had snowballed. Limbaugh announced that since Obama, Clinton, and McCain would be equally destructive, he’d just as soon let the GOP lose and see the Democrats “take the hit.” After McCain won Florida, he gave an “I will fight on!” concession speech on behalf of conservatism itself. Coulter pushed McCain-bashing into parody when she asserted

that if McCain got the nomination, she’d endorse Hillary—no, campaign for her!

These gestures inspired lesser coups. Much was made of the *New York Times*’s endorsement. Malkin’s discovery that McCain’s “outreach director” was the former head of the Presidential Office for Mexicans Abroad in Vicente Fox’s government was almost too perfect. Laura Ingraham piled on. At the recent Conservative Political Action Conference, a Republicans Against Maverick McCain group started; they’re serious and growing. Researchers at Townhall.com are surely busy trying to find the McCain-Rosie O’Donnell connection.

The presumed beneficiary of the rebellion was, until he dropped out, Mitt Romney. Levin made this explicit, exhorting the troops to “Rally for Romney” on *National Review Online*. Others followed suit. Thus a moderate Wall Street Republican, if ever one was, had the mantle of Goldwater thrust upon him. Of all Romney’s rebrandings, “savior of the conservative base” was not his most convincing.

Moreover, while George W. Bush is guilty of many McCainian indiscretions—amnesty for illegals, reaching out to liberals to support his big government schemes—most conservatives still abhor criticism of the president.

It’s also yet to be seen whether the McCain-haters won’t just click their heels and fall in line come November, perhaps swooning over the senator’s talk of a certain “transcendent challenge.” Blogger and Romney enthusiast Hugh Hewitt jumped on the anti-McCain bandwagon when it helped his candidate—

and then off it once McCain’s ascension was assured and Hewitt’s standing in the GOP might have been threatened.

This strange rebellion is deserving of skepticism, but it certainly amounts to much more than irrational flailing.

Coulter offered one of the more insightful comments of the season when she said that Hillary would be a better terror warrior than McCain: she supports the surge, keeps quiet about torture and Gitmo (unlike McCain), and her promises of “ending the war” are deliberately vague. The lady is not for retreating.

Beyond this, whatever one might say about the ideological integrity of Rush and friends, they have been using arguments that at least gesture toward the conservative tradition: the McCain-Feingold campaign-finance reform suppresses political speech; trial lawyers are the beneficiaries of the McCain-Kennedy-Edwards patients bill of rights; McCain has thrice backed amnesty legislation in Congress and should be expected to do the same as president.

In his apologetic for the anti-McCainites, John O’Sullivan argued that Limbaugh and Levin are right to buck the “lesser of two evils” logic of political coalitions and consider willing a GOP defeat:

Many conservatives believe that the key question in this election is: Are there to be two multiculturalist, open-borders parties or one? If McCain’s election were to make the GOP fundamentally similar to the Democrats on immigration, bilingualism, racial preferences, and all the National Question issues, that

would be a resounding historical defeat for conservatives.

To their credit, Limbaugh and Levin insist that McCain hasn't earned their vote. Coulter has said some things she simply can't take back.

The point here is not to praise commentators for saying some things that resemble passages from *The Conscience of a Conservative*, although some praise is in order. More important is that the anti-McCain revolt, accompanied by the return of some traditional arguments, has revealed fissures in the American Right that for the past six years (if not longer) remained below the surface, covered over with conviviality over the Iraq War.

As the mainstream media has picked up on the schism, they have generally described it as a battle between the conservative hardcore and the party "moderates." Super Tuesday was thus, in the words of Diane Sawyer, a "referendum on Rush" in which cooler heads prevailed.

There is a degree of truth to this. The radio talkers want to destroy liberals, and McCain was always suspect for teaming up with the likes of Kennedy, Edwards, and Lieberman. Still, such a view of the rebellion fails to take into account that the radio talkers have targeted another group of "enemies within," McCain's *éminences grises*, who are almost never described as "moderate."

As Levin raged on just before Super Tuesday, he called out the *Weekly Standard*'s Fred Barnes and Bill Kristol and the *Wall Street Journal*'s Dorothy Rabinowitz as the chief traitors pushing McCain on conservatives. As early as January, Rush was attacking Barnes and David Brooks for presiding over the "destruction of the Republican Party," the latter as the one behind an unholy Lieberman-McCain ticket. Limbaugh and Levin wouldn't dare throw out a term like "neocon," and risk sounding like Michael Moore, but the intellectual

identity of the group pushing McCain certainly isn't lost on them.

The neocons' reaction to the Arizona senator's rise is almost the polar opposite of movement conservatives'—and in many cases, they've gone after the radio talkers directly. On NPR, Brooks opined that Republican voters have spurned the once regnant loud mouths and presumably embraced the kind of politically liberal hawk of his "national greatness conservatism" dreams. Barnes, who called Rush & Co. the "talk-radio mafia," published an article urging conservatives to "grow up" and get behind the nominee, claiming that this is the only way for conservatives to keep themselves from being marginalized.

Kristol has been even more clever, expressing satisfaction with all Republican candidates and promising conservatives that they will have influence no matter who's nominated: "What it means to be a serious, successful, and mature political movement is to take men like these—one might say to take advantage of men like these—in order to advance one's principles and causes."

There's something disingenuous about these demands to compromise coupled with promises of influence. Kristol has never compromised on McCain or desired to change him. He endorsed him in 2000 and would have earlier in 2008 had McCain not stumbled out of the gates. Moreover, one wonders what "principles and causes" Kristol hopes the movement might advance while "tak[ing] advantage" of the malleable Republican candidates. Some of Kristol's past causes include removing the pro-life plank from the GOP platform and encouraging mass Third World immigration. Other *Weekly Standard* contributions to the movement include "big government conservatism" and "the conservative case for gay marriage."

The point is not to analyze again the ways neoconservatism doesn't fit into

the movement of Goldwater and Reagan. Suffice it to say that the differences are real—sometimes being a matter of priorities, sometimes much more—and that the McCain ascension has brought these fissures into stark relief. Put simply, Kristol and friends share McCain's foreign policy, and whatever objections they have to his domestic agenda are relatively unimportant.

For the past three elections, the GOP has run campaigns based on national security. Fervent support for the Iraq War, was the criterion for the conservative/non-conservative, friend/enemy distinction. Thus in movement publications like *National Review*, McCain received wrist slapping for his domestic-policy indiscretions while conservatives like Pat Buchanan, rock-solid on the home-front but antiwar, were excommunicated. At some level, it must be dawning on pundits that support for the war above all eventually delivers Republican candidates who are reliably militant but terrible on everything else. Surely the images from Florida of a triumphant McCain flanked by Joe Lieberman, Al Gore's running mate, must have hammered this point home.

McCain might be exactly the kind of disaster candidate the anti-McCainites deserve. But then this doesn't mean that the talk-radio rebellion isn't healthy for the movement. Any counterattack against the neocons will be limited in scope for the simple reasons that they are well ensconced and the radio talkers are not close to rethinking their commitment to the Iraq War. The clash will continue to be over priorities. Nevertheless, the fact that major pundits of the Right are willing to stand against McCain offers a bit of hope that the conservative movement might become something more than just a war party. ■

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# Pardon the Ex-President

Bill Clinton spent his public life making a legacy and his legacy years making money. What trouble will he make for Hillary?

By Nicholas von Hoffman

BILL CLINTON fought so hard against becoming an ex-president in his trial in the Senate that he may not have thought about how an ex ought to behave when his time in office was up.

There are models he might have copied. He might have meditated on the post-White House years of John Quincy Adams, who left the presidency to become a congressman and such an unflinching champion of free speech and abolitionism that he was nicknamed "Old Man Eloquent." (Bill, on the other hand, is at risk of being remembered as Old Man Delinquent.)

Thanks to his intransigence, Adams achieved a post-White House unpopularity eclipsing that of Jimmy Carter, an ex-president who is able to irritate even those who are in wholehearted agreement with him. Carter is a man much admired for what he does even though, when he flashes that nasty sweet smile, he drives people nuts. Like Adams, an easy man to admire, a hard man to like. (With Bill, it's the other way around.)

Herbert Hoover's chief function, in the decade after his defeated attempt at re-election in 1932, was to be a football for the Democrats. But redemption came to Hoover when Harry Truman asked him to head an effort to devise a plan to reorganize the federal government. The Hoover Commission was as much of a success as anyone could have asked for, taking into account the inevitabilities of politics and the jackass factor in human events.

Former presidents can do great things or cause havoc. Theodore Roosevelt was a major wrecker of havoc. After leaving office he split the Republican Party in two, causing the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson. With the outbreak of World War I, the rip-snorting ex-prexy tramped back and forth across the country, denouncing Wilson as a poltroon for not joining the fray. Unlike today's politicians, TR paid for his bellicosity when he lost a son in the war he did so much to precipitate.

Some ex-presidents have been content to retire to their desks to write books, all but one of which are of interest to no one other than graduate students. Ulysses S. Grant's autobiography stands alone as a work of quality; Bill Clinton's, after a mixed reception, appears to have been relegated to the stack of rarely read former presidential effusions.

Like Clinton, Richard Nixon also left the White House in disgrace, but the latter spent his post-presidential years working to get back into good odor. Bill Clinton, who doesn't seem to have recognized the truly low opinion he was held in, not only by his political opponents but also by the yallerest of yaller-dog Democrats, has spent no time atoning. If you haven't sinned you are not in need of redemption.

Though he may sometimes look like the aging roué and disbarred lawyer he is, the smiling, toe-tapping Bill we see on TV acts as though he were in a perpet-

ual state of grace. In their post White House years, Wilson, Coolidge, Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon lived as though they had an obligation to conduct themselves so as to uphold the dignity of the office they had once held. Bill Clinton burst out of his eight years on Pennsylvania Avenue like a youth with a fresh college degree and a world-is-my-oyster attitude.

When, near the end of his term, Calvin Coolidge was offered dignified employment by Charlie Merrill of Merrill Lynch, he turned it down. Clinton apparently turns nothing down when the tincture of money passes his nostrils. It is as though he has sublimated his roaring libido into an unzipped drive for money.

Accurate figures are not available, but from information derived from Hillary Clinton's Senate disclosure forms, this couple, who left the White House in debt thanks to Bill's legal bills, is worth upwards of \$54 million. They are rich enough that Mrs. Clinton could write a check of \$5 million for her presidential campaign with the ease of someone sending in the monthly mortgage payment.

In the circles Bill Clinton moves in, his activities are difficult to trace, for his is a life of private jets, walled mansions, smoked windows, and deluxe hideouts whose existence is known only to the billionaires who own them and the body servants who maintain them. Nonetheless, here and there a muffled Clintonian footfall can be heard and a glimpse be