

Look Homeward

The identification of the Republican Party with conservative institutions has become so complete that establishment leaders react to candidates in the GOP

primaries as if the eventual Republican nominee were the *de facto* head of the movement as well.

As the repudiation of John McCain in the Kansas and Washington caucuses shows, conservative activists are angry that McCain, who is unacceptable to them on many counts (and even more so to antiwar conservatives), has become the presumptive nominee. This frustration stems in part from many conservatives' continued embrace of the sitting president and their strange impulse to anoint his successor as the leading representative of conservatism. Both before and after Mitt Romney's sudden withdrawal, many prominent movement figures were trying to declare him their leader in the same way that conservatives adopted another wealthy, moderate Republican as their standard-bearer in 2000. They fail to see that this is exactly how they enabled Mr. Bush to do so much damage to the reputation of conservatism and to the country.

Currently, the GOP coalition is much less "conservative" than it was ten years ago, yet today far more Republicans use the word to describe themselves. This does not represent the triumph of conservative principles so much as the dilution of the term. The name has become a marker and proof of some right to belong, but has consequently become much less significant. We are experiencing the confusion that inevitably follows the overuse of a term that empties it of all meaning.

McCain's critics fear a redefinition of conservatism once he is nominated, but this anxiety would be baseless if so many

of them had not for the last seven years contorted arguments of the traditional Right to defend Bush administration policies. For this reason, conservatives feel a certain relief that talk-radio hosts and pundits failed to rally support for Romney, as McCain's nomination shows the stark reality that party interests and constituencies are not necessarily theirs. It is doubtful that the concerns of conservatives and the GOP have ever coincided entirely, but because they have so diverged in recent years, conservatives need a different relationship with the party if they are to preserve the goods and institutions they want to defend.

If the movement is not going to be an appendage of the GOP in the future, its leaders will need to recognize that the outcome of the Republican nomination contest does not have to define the future of the movement. Its support for a given Republican administration should never be foreordained. That may yield some better results on policy, since it makes it harder for the party to take movement support or acquiescence for granted.

If conservatives allow their priorities to be dictated by transient political needs of the GOP, they will find themselves increasingly dissatisfied with the direction of their movement. They will also be unable to speak out credibly against Republican follies and failures. Without that independence, they will find themselves, as many do today, complicit in the errors of the party.

This political autonomy should not simply be a rhetorical or a scapegoating tactic when things go wrong. It must

rather be a consistent strategy of keeping a healthy distance from a party organization that may have certain common goals but also interests that do not always align. If such a path were taken, there would be much less anxiety every four years about the dangers of "redefining conservatism" for political ends. There would also be much less danger of allying conservatism with revolutionary and destructive policies out of some misguided sense of partisan solidarity.

An important step in the direction of independence would be moving conservative institutions away from Washington. As with every kind of decentralist approach, this would make conservative institutions more aware of different conditions around the country and reintroduce them to local and regional perspectives, as well as removing them to some degree from the influence of the party leadership. This reorganization would then also give greater incentives to pursue and defend actual political and economic decentralization. When movement institutions have no concrete interest in localism, they will acquiesce to centralist policies that are ostensibly pursued for "conservative ends" but actually subvert the natural affinities that are fundamental to realizing those goals.

If we remember that conservatism is a temperament, a disposition and a series of mental and cultural habits rather than a programmatic agenda, we will find that more lasting accomplishments are possible in our homes and neighborhoods than in conventional political activism. This does not mean abandoning political affairs or ignoring the distorting and corrupting effects of the concentration of power, which must still be combated. It does, however, require a significant reorientation—homeward. ■

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*]

The Beholder of the Eye

By Steve Sailer

DESPITE DESERVED Oscar nominations for Best Direction, Adapted Screenplay, Editing, and Cinematography, “*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*,” a sophisticated triumph of the human spirit movie, hasn’t been able to break out of the art-house ghetto. Its ponderous title, which is both too literary and too literal (and mistranslated to boot), can’t have helped.

The film is based on a charming memoir written, incredibly, by a man able to move only his left eyelid. Jean-Dominique Bauby, the 43-year-old editor of the fashion magazine *Elle*, suffered a massive brain stem stroke while test-driving next year’s model BMW. When he awoke from his coma, he was informed that he suffered, permanently, from “*maladie de l’immuré vivant*,” or “locked-in syndrome.”

The unfortunate title (*Le Scaphandre et le Papillon* in this subtitled film’s original French) comes from Bauby’s metaphorical contrast of his body, which felt like it was encased in one of those vintage pressurized diving suits—not a “diving bell,” which is an open-bottomed structure—with his mind, which could float like a butterfly through his luxurious memories. He could even

relish new sights and (being French) smells. Indeed, *The Diving Bell* is an ode to the French genius for enjoying small pleasures.

“Blink” would have been a simpler, more evocative title because his speech therapist taught him to communicate using his eyelid. She would repeat the alphabet (re-sorted in order of frequency of use in French) until he blinked his one good eye to stop her at the right letter.

Director Julian Schnabel, the New York artist turned moviemaker, employs prodigious imagination to liven up the proceedings, filming many scenes from Bauby’s perspective. Nevertheless, “*The Diving Bell*’s” pace is necessarily languid. With time on my hands, I wondered if Morse Code, which POW Jeremiah Denton used to blink “t-o-r-t-u-r-e” on North Vietnamese television, wouldn’t have been faster.

Bauby composed his text in his head each morning, memorized it, and then dictated it to a secretary for three hours per day for two months. His short book of about 25,000 words was published in 1997 to rapturous reviews two days before his death.

It’s a wonderful story, but is it true? Journalist Susannah Herbert has raised doubts in the *Times* of London, pointing out that Bauby’s “secretary,” the self-effacing Claude Mendibil, is a professional ghostwriter, who refused to show her the original notebooks.

I calculate that to complete a first draft in two months, Bauby would have had to dictate 135 words per hour (or one letter every five or six seconds). That would be difficult, but not impossible, because Mendibil would often correctly guess many word endings. So I won’t reject the movie’s authenticity,

especially because I want to believe that the story is true. (Certainly, though, Mendibil deserves credit she’s never claimed for the sheen of the final draft.)

One irony of the film is the attitude of veteran screenwriter Ronald Harwood (“*The Pianist*”) toward his hero: “But there was something about him and his lifestyle that I didn’t like: He was indifferent to the mother of his children, and that whole glamorous *Elle* magazine lifestyle ... is not so admirable, is it?” To emphasize the scurrilousness of Bauby’s abandonment of his old mistress for his new mistress, Harwood adds a third adorable small child to the two he actually left behind.

Perhaps Harwood suspects Bauby’s stroke was brought on by the favorite hobby of skinny fashionistas, but I can find no evidence online for cocaine use. Similarly, when I had cancer in 1997, acquaintances who didn’t smoke would ask my wife if I did. When she’d reply, “No,” they’d go away looking pensive. Everybody deep down wants to believe that the sick brought their illnesses on themselves, because that means that, if you’re careful, you’ll never die.

Harwell had to invent for Bauby an emotional arc from initial suicidal depression to the recovery of his will to live because the book portrays him as remarkably chipper throughout his ordeal, espousing a Nabokovian delight in the visual details he could espy from his bed and wheelchair. The film rather misses the point that as a man of fashion, and French fashion at that, Bauby believed in the moral duty of sustaining a classy facade. Thus he insisted on being dressed each day in his own stylish clothes, noting, “If I must drool, I may as well drool on cashmere.” ■

Rated PG-13 for nudity, sexual content, and some language.