

The Right Democrat

South Carolina Senate candidate Bob Conley is more conservative than his GOP foe.

By Jack Hunter

ON JUNE 11, “The Morning Buzz” radio show on WTMA 1250 AM in Charleston, South Carolina was bombarded with phone calls from listeners railing against Sen. Lindsey Graham, who the day before had secured the GOP nomination. Not a single pro-Graham call came in during the four-hour program. “I’m a Republican ... but I’m voting Democrat this November,” one caller vowed. “Grahamnesty has got to go!”

Despite this post-primary radio outrage, observers see few hurdles on the horizon for the incumbent senator. But “Grahamnesty”—so called because of his support of the 2007 Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act—finds himself confronting a challenge from an unexpected quarter this November.

A June 12 headline in Charleston’s *Post & Courier* read, “Dems seem to back conservative” in reference to Democratic primary winner Bob Conley, who barely secured his party’s nomination. (The final tally after a recount revealed that Conley won by only 986 votes out of the 144,460 cast.) “We’ve nominated a Republican in a Democratic primary,” said Conley’s challenger, Michael Cone. And indeed, the story revealed that Conley held a number of conservative positions, had only recently left the Republican Party, and even voted for Ron Paul in South Carolina’s presidential primary. But while Cone fumed, former Democratic National Chairman Don Fowler accepted Conley. “That’s the Democratic Party. We welcome anybody,” he said.

Fowler’s open-armed invitation could be comforting, as “Flattop Bob,” as Conley is often called, is as conservative as his Johnny Unitas-style haircut suggests. In private conversation, he uses the terms “populist,” “traditionalist,” and even “paleoconservative” favorably and frequently, and refers to Washington, D.C. as the “District of Criminals.” Over a pile of BBQ and collard greens (his choice), Bob explained his wardrobe woes: “First my advisers took my suit, then my long sleeves. It just doesn’t feel right for me to wear a short-sleeve dress shirt, Jack.” For the Catholic Conley, wearing his Sunday best is the norm: he tries to attend Mass every day. “The worst part is sometimes we have to be mean to him and tell him he simply doesn’t have time to go,” explains campaign manager Dan Castell, noting how impractical Conley’s church schedule is in the midst of a Senate run.

The Democratic establishment long ago wrote off this contest. Lindsey Graham is a well-funded incumbent in a deep red state. A weak field allowed the virtually unknown Conley, an engineer and commercial pilot, to take the nomination. Now Graham, much to his surprise, must compete with a Democrat who stands well to his right.

On immigration, the issue that so animated the WTMA audience, Conley’s position resembles legislation recently passed in the Republican-dominated South Carolina statehouse, including measures that impose stiff penalties for employers who hire illegal aliens. But he rejects accusations that his stance mir-

rors the Republican position: “If President Bush and John McCain and Lindsey Graham all want to give amnesty, want to import more foreign nationals to take our jobs, I don’t see how I’m holding the position they do.”

When discussing job losses and trade deficits, Conley never mentions “China” without adding “communist” first. Lou Dobbs would smile.

Such populism could put Graham, an avid cheerleader for free trade, at a serious disadvantage in a state where Sen. Fritz Hollings spent nearly four decades championing economic nationalism. John Edwards ran strong in upstate South Carolina—he defeated Obama and Clinton in Oconee County with 45 percent of the vote and had strong second-place showings in half a dozen of the surrounding counties. That Oconee is Edwards’s birthplace was undoubtedly a factor in his success, but so were campaign speeches promising more jobs and fairer trade. Employment is a pressing issue here: last month, Hollings told Myrtle Beach’s *Sun News*, “We’ve lost 94,500 manufacturing jobs, a net loss counting the jobs we got, in the last 7 years, since little boy George [W. Bush] has been in office.” The majority of those losses were suffered in the upstate.

Campaigning in the Democratic primary, Conley performed strongly in the same areas that favored Edwards. His victories were close in each upstate county, but these wins proved decisive. Economic populism resonates with local Republicans as well. Conley says that “from York to Anderson counties, they’ve

still got Duncan Hunter signs up,” referring to the congressman who was arguably the most protectionist candidate in this year’s GOP presidential primary. The alleged benefits of the managed, corporate trade deals touted by Graham are a hard sell in these counties, and the senator’s constant absence from the state gives many voters the perception that he simply doesn’t care about them.

Castell is forthright about the Conley campaign’s themes: “We’re populists, we’re going straight to the people of SC, that’s all we care about. ... We’ll ask, ‘You seen Lindsey? Is he still out running around with McCain? It looks like we’re running for a vacant seat.’”

Conley is at least as socially conservative as Graham, whose pro-life and anti-gay-marriage positions are popular in South Carolina. And many cultural conservatives distrust the sitting senator. Graham’s challenger in the Republican primary, Buddy Witherspoon, defeated him in Greenville, one of the most conservative counties in the state.

Conley doesn’t shrink from comparisons to Patrick Buchanan’s populism—he often makes them himself—though he is more likely to be recognized as a “Ron Paul Democrat.” He shares many of the Texas congressman’s positions, and his support for Paul in the primary has been well publicized. “If you take a look at the folks on Capitol Hill who have really taken leadership positions,” says Conley, “and you also take a look at the entire field of fellows who were running for president, there is no one on Capitol Hill who has been a stronger voice against Iraq policy, even prior to the invasion, than Ron Paul.” Like Paul, Conley keeps a copy of the Constitution on his person. It’s not much use to him, however, as he has most of the text memorized.

Conley fully embraces the antiwar themes of the Paul campaign. He believes the U.S. needs to “redeploy our

troops home as quickly as is practical and consistent with their safety.” He also promises to repeal the PATRIOT Act and views the current war-induced hysteria as a danger to civil liberties.

Graham’s “the surge is working” rhetoric plays well in South Carolina, which has more veterans and active-duty military personnel per capita than any other state. The senator regularly touts his military credentials as a colonel in the Air Force Reserve: election mailers featured him dressed in fatigues, flying over the desert in helicopters, and literally drawing lines in the sands of Iraq. Graham, like McCain and Bush, promotes the narrative that supporting the troops means supporting the wars they fight, a view South Carolina majorities have repeatedly affirmed at the ballot box.

But Graham’s assumptions about a pro-war consensus may no longer be accurate. In neighboring North Carolina, antiwar Republicans Walter Jones and B.J. Lawson defied the conventional wisdom and enjoyed substantial victories in their congressional primary contests. Jones’s district is one of the most military-heavy regions in the country, including three Marine bases, Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, and roughly 60,000 veterans. Jones beat his Republican primary challenger, who attempted to paint the congressman as weak on military issues, with nearly 60 percent of the vote.

Whether or not Jones and Lawson represent a significant trend among Republicans, Conley points to a definite pattern in his own party, where Sen. Jim Webb of Virginia, Congressman Heath Shuler of North Carolina, Congressman Tim Mahoney of Florida, Sen. Jon Tester of Montana, Sen. Bob Casey of Pennsylvania, and Congressmen Brad Ellsworth and Joe Donnelly of Indiana have all recently enjoyed victories against incumbent Republicans. Often with less money and name recognition, these self-described Blue Dog Democrats won by

campaigning on relatively conservative, antiwar, and populist themes.

Conley constantly puts his own campaign into a larger political and historical context, whether Blue Dog, Southern Democrat, or Old Right. He rattles off long forgotten politicians, elections, and legislation with ease. “Bob’s the smartest guy I know,” says adviser Brian Frank. “He’s a walking encyclopedia and he’s absolutely obsessed with dead people.” Frank also reports that Conley only listens to classical music.

Granted, Graham enjoys significant advantages over Conley in experience, organization, and fundraising—the senator reportedly has around \$4.5 million on hand. And in a state where voters are accustomed to Thurmonds, Hollingses, and Ravenels holding the reins of government, the immense benefit of a famous surname is not lost on the unknown challenger. While his friends and admirers love to point out that, as Frank puts it, “Bob is just a regular guy who wants to help his country,” Conley’s success will depend on whether enough regular folks, with the means and the desire, rally to his campaign.

His opponent suffers none of these constraints and could afford largely to ignore the primary. At WTMA in Charleston, Graham ran radio ads touting his many trips to Iraq, but was the only candidate among those running for a variety of state offices to decline an interview with our station. He has also avoided facing the public about his support for amnesty after getting booed at the few Republican gatherings he’s attended. Unlike McCain, Graham won’t challenge his opponent to town hall discussions.

He doesn’t think he needs to. In Graham and Jim DeMint’s last senatorial races, both won with roughly 54 percent of the vote compared to 44 percent garnered by their Democratic challengers. But most Republicans this year aren’t enthusiastic about their party or their

presidential candidate, and Senator Graham is one of the most unpopular Republicans in the country after President Bush. Moreover, with black South Carolinians excited about Barack Obama, they could create a scenario in which 30 percent of the state's population supports Conley de facto by voting a straight Democratic ticket. In Georgia, Virginia, and a host of other Southern states, the DNC could try to recruit unregistered black voters; SC has an estimated 200,000.

When asked about Conley's conservatism by a television reporter for WRAL, Graham's response was indicative of the dynamics of the contest: "from what I can tell, he doesn't represent moderation. I represent a brand of conservatism that you will feel comfortable with." Is Graham painting himself as a moderate in an election where his constituents already have serious reservations about his conservative credentials? Not even Graham's supporters are entirely "comfortable" with him these days, something the senator seems to realize since he won't even talk to them.

If lightning strikes twice and the unorthodox candidate few predicted to win the Democratic primary prevails in the general election, Conley will have pulled off one of the greatest electoral upsets in recent memory. This is unquestionably Graham's race to lose. But in a political environment where most voters agree that Graham's record is embarrassing, even if Bob Conley goes down in defeat, an unexpected attack from the right by a Blue Dog Democrat might be enough to make this red-state Republican senator blush. ■

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Power Failure

The energy crunch emerges as the 21st century's top national-security issue.

By Andrew A. Michta

ON MAY 2, 2008, Goldman Sachs finally called it: the super-spike endgame in oil has begun. The price per barrel of crude could reach \$200 in the next six to 24 months, with continued extreme volatility. The report confirmed what the U.S. Department of Energy chooses to ignore but others have been saying since at least 2005: we have entered a period of "peak oil," in which demand consistently outstrips global supply, amid growing uncertainty about the price of energy and the availability of reserves.

About a month later, Morgan Stanley warned of a "monumental transfer of wealth to oil exporters, which may last beyond our generation, with important geopolitical and security implications." Receipts of oil exporters are running as high as several billion dollars per day, with \$1 billion going to Saudi Arabia. OPEC's surplus this year is projected to reach \$500 billion, with most of it flooding into sovereign wealth funds—essentially investment arms of foreign governments. At the oil price of \$135 a barrel, Morgan Stanley estimated that the stock of the proven reserves of the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries would be worth about \$65 trillion. By comparison, the world's total public equity market capitalization is around \$50 trillion.

A glance at the exploding skyline of Dubai tells the story better than reams of market-intelligence reports. We are in the midst of the most massive wealth trans-

fer the world has ever witnessed, and it is driven not by market forces but by an increasingly state-controlled global energy-supply monopoly. Unchecked, this economic shift will result in a radical reordering of the global balance of power.

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The most common explanation for the energy crunch is the widening gap between supply and demand, with the culprit—depending on one's ideological predilection—being shady oil companies or skyrocketing consumption in the United States, European Union, China, and India. These explanations are partly true but incomplete.

According to EU projections, between 2002-2030, demand for oil in the U.S. and Canada will grow by 34 percent from 19.7 million barrels to 26.3 million per day. The EU will see its energy needs expand 15 percent, and Japan and Korea will consume an additional 11 percent. China's demand will grow by a whopping 157 percent over the same period—from 4.9 million barrels per day to 12.7 million—displacing the EU as the second largest consumer of oil. India will consume an additional 124 percent.

But there is little direct connection between present demand and the surge in prices. From 2002 to 2007, the price of oil rose \$60 per barrel, then last year it jumped another \$60. Consumption, while rising, had scarcely doubled.