

## Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

### Conservatives lash out at Bush

*Shallow platitudes in his speech to Congress betrayed the President's equivocation on the SDI.*

Activists of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) gathered at their annual confab here Feb. 23-26, weren't bashful at their opening session about sending a message to President George Bush. They aren't happy with his program on national defense and other issues, and they aren't about to give him their uncritical support.

They sent their message through Republican National Committee chairman Lee Atwater in the very first session of the conference. Atwater's attempt to portray the administration as "hard-core conservative" got mixed reviews, to say the least. At one point, he crowed that if anyone thought there was a single person appointed to a post in the new administration who was not a conservative, he should write a letter, and, Atwater said, "I'll find that person, and tell him to become a conservative by sundown or get out of town."

But Atwater's tough-talking punk persona did not push this audience into passive submission. One of the first questions put to him came from James Bieber, a college student who is president of the Orange County chapter of the California Young Americans for Freedom.

The California YAF had already been circulating a "Bush Report Card," which gave him an F and three D-minuses on national security issues, such as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Its flier was printed on letterhead prominently listing former President Reagan as the chairman of the organization's State Advisory Board.

Bieber told Atwater, "If you're

looking for a liberal in the new administration, you don't need to look any farther than your boss," and rattled off some examples to make his point.

Bieber's remarks were met by spontaneous applause.

Atwater was destabilized, and snapped back nastily with a stock answer usually reserved for use against Democrats. "If you think that Dukakis or any other Democrat would be more conservative than George Bush," he intoned, "Then you are sorely mistaken."

Bieber was not intimidated, and reiterated his point, noting that the decision to cut the defense budget, in particular, "sounded an awful lot like a liberal." Again, Bieber was applauded, this time loudly.

Atwater growled, "You will never elect a more conservative President this century than George Bush." Said Bieber, "I don't agree. I'm sorry," and Atwater replied, "I'm sorry, too."

The next question came from an older participant, who asked Atwater why Bush supported the pay raise for Congress. Atwater spent 10 minutes trying to dance around that issue in a disjointed answer.

Needless to say, those who voted for Bush because of his many promises that he would carry forward the Reagan legacy of support for a strong defense have a lot of reason to be howling, even at this early stage.

For example, as recently as his Feb. 9 speech before the Joint Session of Congress, Bush sounded emphatic, "I will vigorously pursue the Strategic Defense Initiative." But at the White House Feb. 21, I put the following question to Bush:

"Mr. President, you said during your speech to the Joint Session of Congress that your support for the Strategic Defense Initiative was unqualified, but Budget Director Richard Darman, when he briefed us on your budget, said that it was conditional on the outcome of this 90-day review that's coming up. Is it, or is it not conditional, and would you rule out curtailing the program to an accidental launch protection system?"

Bush replied, according to the official transcript, "I'm not ruling anything in or out. I have stated my support for the principle of the SDI. I have not favored what some would call 'premature deployment,' but on the other hand, I will be very interested in seeing what this overall review comes up with. And I'm not going to close any doors or open any in regards to this or any other systems. We're going to have to make some tough choices on defense: I'm aware of that. And so, let's wait and see what the review produces."

That's hardly "vigorous pursuit" of the SDI. One veteran reporter commented to me as the press conference ended, "Well, I wouldn't buy any stock in the SDI after that answer!"

And, as the California YAF flier pointed out, "John Tower and especially Gen. Brent Scowcroft's opposition to SDI has been known."

The plan that Lee Atwater laid out at the CPAC conference for revitalizing the party was cause for even more concern. He said the key was finding "qualified candidates," and he said he planned to do this by bringing prospective candidates to Washington to meet with the party hierarchy, even the President.

To many there, this meant that all candidates would have to get the stamp of approval from Washington before being supported to run. Hardly an appealing idea to grass-roots activists.