

GOP Convention Shows A Party in Disarray

by William Jones

The neatly scripted four-day gala event in New York, which Republican party operatives so pompously labelled their National Convention, would have won the admiration of Leni Riefenstahl, the film choreographer of that monumental 1934 Nazi rally in Nuremberg, which Riefenstahl memorialized in her propaganda film "The Triumph of the Will." But underneath the strong show of unity behind Republican Presidential nominee George W. Bush, the party is in a state of turmoil, with a variety of factions jockeying to gain influence over a second Bush Administration, assuming he is re-elected.

Prior to the convention, there had been a concerted push by saner elements in the Republican Party to force Bush to jettison Dick Cheney, the éminence grise behind the wild-eyed neo-conservatives, a number of whom are now under investigation for transmitting highly classified information on U.S. policy on Iran, to Israel, through an interface in the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Unfortunately for the fate of the world, Cheney won that fight, and flaunted his victory by emerging from the shadows to play a more visible, prominent role in this year's convention.

Cheney's Position Enhanced

It was, in fact, the Vice President who effectively opened the convention by arriving in New York City one day before the formal opening, to give a speech at Ellis Island. With Lower Manhattan as his backdrop, Cheney announced the theme of the convention as: George Bush—the stalwart defender of the nation after Sept. 11.

The disastrous war on Iraq has led notable figures in the Republican Party, including former cabinet members, diplomats, and retired military officers, to harshly criticize the Bush Administration's conduct of the war. In a number of high-profile cases, some, like Lt. Gen. Michael McPeak, have even left the Republican Party in disgust in order to work for Democratic candidate John Kerr.

Nevertheless, it was clear to Karl Rove and the Bush team that George Bush's only chance of being re-elected was to don the garb of the "compassionate conservative," as he had in the 2000 election. This would broaden his base beyond the small circle of neo-con warmongers and their fans, and the fundamentalist Christians, who tend to view Iraq as part of a Great Crusade, that is never-ending (or at least continues until "the Rapture" carries them away). Therefore, moderate Republicans were prominently featured as speakers in the prime-time television slots. Kicking off the speakers' list was Ari-

zona Senator John McCain. While giving his support to Bush, he still refused to line up behind the vicious attacks against John Kerry being conducted on behalf of the Administration by the "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" group, and instead he called for respecting one's opponents.

No matter. The organizers had already lined up attack dogs like Zell Miller, an unreconstructed George Wallace-style southern Democrat, to lead the pack in an attack on Kerry. Miller, in a virtual frenzy, let fly the absolutely worse fillips against the Democratic Party presidential candidate. Miller was followed by a gloating Dick Cheney, who knew that any nasty things he might say against Kerry in his own speech would pale in comparison to the venom spewed by Miller. While reiterating the familiar "unfit to command" shibboleths against Kerry, Cheney generally tried to adopt a "kinder, gentler look." For example, he followed up his earlier statements in favor of gay marriages with a statement of support for his lesbian daughter, who accompanied him to the convention but played no major role in the proceedings.

Still in the Saddle, If Not on the Stage

Although few from the conservative wing of the party were given slots on the speaker's platform, they were heavily involved in the delegate hotels with a flurry of activity throughout the four days. There were the daily prayer breakfasts, as well as the introduction of Catholic services, as part of the outreach to the traditional Democratic Catholic voters. At an invitation-only event hosted by that darling of the Christian right, Sen. Sam Brownback, on Aug. 31, Brownback called for "a broad social conservative agenda notably different from the televised presentations." The Brownback agenda included "loosening the requirements on the separation of church and state."

President Bush also flaunted his own "born-again" credentials by referring in his acceptance speech to the "mission" which the country had received "from beyond the stars." A videotape was also shown throughout the convention, entitled "Faith in the White House," gushing over Bush's "born-again" Christianity. This was narrated by Christian talk-show hostess and raving pro-Sharon clone, Janet Parshall, who was also featured prominently in the off-site and invitation-only events held by the Armageddon crowd during the convention.

A number of party honchos felt that the "social agenda" might also be used in Republican outreach to Democratic layers. This approach was most clearly evidenced in a "Grass-Roots Training Session" held by GOPAC on Aug. 31, featuring former House Speaker and now talking-head Newt Gingrich, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, and former Oklahoma Congressman, J.C. Watts. Gingrich—the principal author of the fascist "Contract With America" in 1994—laid out the program for "A 21st Century Contract" for the Republican Party.

Gingrich described the current war on terrorism as "like the war against Hitler in the 1930s." As to Bush's statement a few days prior that the war on terrorism was "unwinnable,"



Tuskegee Airmen, veterans of World War II, rally at Grant's Tomb in New York City on Aug. 30. Described as "the greatest of the Great Generation," referring to the all-black unit, the Airmen were joined by other veterans to organize the vote for John Kerry. Rep. Charles Rangel, in whose Harlem district the rally took place, addressed the crowd.

Gingrich predicted it would "take until 2070" to emerge victorious. "We're closer to the beginning than we are to the end of the war on terrorism," he intoned.

In addition to the fighting of endless wars, Gingrich proposed that the Republican Party fight for bringing God back into politics, and making sure our school system "teaches children to be Americans," referring to immigrants. The aim of the 1990s Contract With America was to create a Republican majority, bring down the Soviet Union, and end the welfare state. We did that, he stated, now it's time for the next Contract.

New GOP Targets: Blacks and Jews

Among the targetted groups in the Democratic ranks are the black churches. This is in contrast to the highly controversial, and still bitterly resented, policy of the 2000 campaign, in which the Republican suppression of a large chunk of the black vote in Florida helped throw the election into the Supreme Court, thus guaranteeing a Bush victory. Now, Republican campaign coordinators, under the skilled hand of J.C. Watts, are trying to co-opt some of the black vote by forging ties with the black churches under the guise of their contrived "moral" agenda.

In mid-September, Watts announced, 300 pastors will come out in support of Bush, and only 5% of them are Republicans. There is no such thing anymore as a "traditionally Democratic black constituency," the speakers insisted. Electing just ten black Congressmen would break the hold of the left (that is, the Democratic Party) over the Congressional Black Caucus, Gingrich drooled.

A second traditionally Democratic constituency targetted by the Republican Party was the American Jewish community. There was high-profile support given to the Republican

Jewish Coalition (RJC), a prime funder of pro-Zionist Republican candidates. The RJC hosted several events, including a "Salute to the Republican Congress" held Aug. 30, the first evening of the Convention, at which close to two dozen Republican congressmen and senators came to "salute" their Likudnik backers, by reiterating their unconditional support for the state of Israel. The star of the show was House Majority Leader Tom "the Hammer" DeLay (R-Tex.), who has always been prepared to go farther out on the limb than his colleagues in his fervant support for a Greater Israel in the Mideast. This occasion was no exception. "There is no Israeli-Palestinian conflict," DeLay said. "There is only a global war on terrorism!"

"Foresaking Israel now is tantamount to foresaking Great Britain in 1940," DeLay railed, while Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Penna.) assured the frenzied RJC members that the President is "now taking measures to make sure Iran doesn't have nuclear weapons to threaten the state of Israel."

Vice President Dick Cheney was billed as the honored guest at an RJC event on Sept. 2. The organizers were delighted to host such a high-level Administration official, sure it would attract a great deal of media attention. For Cheney, however, this became something of a predicament. Just prior to the convention, the scandal around the Doug Feith Pentagon spy shop had broken, involving allegations of a transfer of classified intelligence to the Israelis through contacts in the Washington office of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Although AIPAC representatives in New York had held an event on Aug. 30 to deny the charges, the atmosphere was hot, especially for Cheney, whose own office had been a command post for the same Pentagon operatives. Cheney told the RJC organizers that he would attend the Sept. 2 event, but that he would not allow media access. Anything

GOP Newsletter Assails 'Bush's Party of Power'

In its lead story Sept. 6, *The Big Picture*, a prestigious newsletter that circulates widely among Republican Party movers and shakers, blasted the Cheney-Bush crowd for its scripted Republican Convention, and the Party's intolerance and dedication only to preserving the President's power.

Under the headline "Bush's Party of Power," newsletter publisher Richard Whalen wrote: "The traditional Grand Old Party of Taft, Eisenhower, Goldwater, Nixon, and Reagan is gone. Vanished without a trace is the old GOP's 'Big Tent' philosophy, where the party's distinct liberal and conservative 'wings' fought out their differences on issues and ideology. . . . President George W. Bush's party is shaped like a church, and not a very big one. . . . Although the entire federal government establishment is in Republican hands, the party is insecure, narrow, doctrinaire, and intolerant. The Bush party is entirely dedicated to perpetuating the President's power."

Whalen also blasted the Bush Administration's Iraq

war, which he described as a "tragic detour" from the war on terrorism, and he zeroed in on Dick Cheney for having plotted an invasion of Iraq for years, in league with the neo-cons.

Whalen assailed both Sen. Zell Miller (Ga.) and Dick Cheney for delivering "stunningly mean-spirited speeches," which set the tone for Bush's own acceptance speech, "exploiting the memory of 9/11 and the public confusion between 'the war on terror' and the war in Iraq." Whalen's prognosis: "If the November election turns on Iraq and the war on terrorism, Bush will win. If the election turns on the disappointing economy, which remains more than a million jobs short in the third year of 'recovery,' Kerry will win."

Whalen also railed against Bush and his "brain," Karl Rove, for devising an election strategy targetted almost exclusively at the Religious Right, dividing and polarizing America.

Whalen's conclusion: "The Republican Party urgently needs a long overdue post-Cold War updating and redefinition, especially the rejection of an unwanted empire and the hopeless doctrine of permanent war. . . . America must regain domestic purpose and international respect through re-dedication to principles of freedom, nationalism and non-interference in the affairs of others."

Cheney said, it seems, would be off the record for reporters—and the American people.

Traditional Republicans Alienated

Those Republicans who still hold to the belief that government that "governs least, governs best," have either migrated to other pastures, sorely disappointed by the way the Bush Administration has created the biggest government boondoggle—and government deficit—in history. The Republican "deficit hawks" have been left licking their wounds by the Bush policy of launching preemptive wars on several different fronts, and creating a veritable "Fortress America," with the new Department of Homeland Security and its adjuncts.

And what about those within the Republican Party who have traditionally been the stalwart defenders of "freedom of the individual"? With the draconian "Patriot Act" of Ashcroft & Company up for renewal, to which even tougher restrictions may be imposed, the rights of individuals in the United States, especially those of Arab heritage, are being rapidly curtailed.

This was the key issue at event sponsored by the Arab American Institute on Sept. 1, in parallel with the Republican Convention. Former Republican Congressman Robert Barr stated there that "the Administration will not tolerate or consider any limitations whatsoever on the Patriot Act," and has

instead proposed enhancements. They have "ignored complaints from groups and Congressmen," of the violation of the civil rights of individuals targetted by the Act. Asked if he regretted voting for the Patriot Act, Rep. Barr said he did.

Most severely handicapped in the new direction given by Bush to the Republican Party are those—people like Senators Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.)—who rejected the knee-jerk unilateralism and chauvinistic arrogance of the neo-conservative ideologues under Cheney, who had choreographed that bloody "cakewalk" into Iraq. Although they are still conducting a fight within the Republican Party in an attempt to return it to a more traditional orientation, they realize that this is an uphill battle. "The Republican Party has come loose of its moorings," Hagel told the *Washington Post*. "I think you've got a party that is in a state of uncertainty." That's putting the case too mildly.

While the well-orchestrated Republican "Nuremberg Rally on the Hudson" seemed to give the impression that the disparate elements of the Republican Party are all shouting "Four more years," a goodly number of them are beginning to view such a contingency with a great deal of trepidation. Many traditional Republicans, who have not wholly gone over to supporting John Kerry, perhaps feel in their heart of hearts, that the best thing to happen to the Grand Ole Party, might be a good solid defeat in November.