

The Heresy Hunters of CPAC

by Michael Moynihan Mar 13, 2013

Ideological purity! Patriots only! The heresy hunters of this week's Conservative Political Action Conference sniffed out and rejected those who aren't 'suitably' right wing, like Chris Christie and GOProud. It'll ensure the same losing result, writes Michael Moynihan.

Every year the doyens of the Conservative Political Action Conference issue a series of indirect proclamations on who qualifies as an echt conservative. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie? Not one of us; too chummy with the president during Hurricane Sandy and too squishy on gun control. The gay conservative group GOProud? We're open to sinners—Newt Gingrich is a scheduled speaker, after all—but not ones who have contempt for the institution of marriage. Donald Trump? A sinner too, on wife No. 3 and pro-abortion rights to boot, he believes that President Obama might have been born in Kenya. Nevertheless, Trump is an "American patriot" popular with conservatives, said one conference organizer.

It's hardly surprising that CPAC is interested in ideological purity, considering the right-wing confab is organized by the American Conservative Union, a group that provides "legislative rankings" to those in Congress who insist on differentiating between those "who protect liberty as conservatives and those who are truly liberal." As its website explains, "ACU defines conservatism" (emphasis in original). And that definition seems rather narrow these days.

This big-game hunting of RINOs ("Republicans in Name Only"), the replacing of unreliably conservative candidates with the undereducated and unelectable ones, lost the party a number of safe seats in recent years. And as anyone who has attended a recent CPAC has witnessed, the "grassroots activists" of the right—a rather different species from the average Republican voter—seem increasingly incapable of calmly arguing that America is being forced off the road to prosperity and onto the road to serfdom. Concerns about overweening government, which one could manage with sensible anecdotes about debt, drones, and taxes, are punctuated with an invocation of Marx or Mao. (At the 2011 CPAC, I spent 10 bizarre minutes chatting with the president of the John Birch Society, a "co-sponsor" of that year's event.)

Between the babble about ascendant American Leninism and the infiltration of the ACU by operatives of the Muslim Brotherhood (seriously), one can't help but be reminded of an ideology CPAC attendees profess to loathe. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell noted that his comrades on the left

frequently obsessed over ideological purity: “Sometimes, when I listen to these people talking ... I get the impression that, to them, the whole socialist movement is no more than a kind of exciting heresy-hunt—a leaping to and fro of frenzied witch-doctors to the beat of tom-toms and the tune of ‘Fee fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of a right-wing deviationist!’”

All chuckled when asked if they would be attending CPAC. Too many kooks, said one. Too much Gingrich and Trump, said another.

The heresy hunters, who have stood foursquare behind an increasingly unpopular party, identified a number of deviationists that aren’t suitably right wing, like Gov. Christie and the rock-ribbed righties of GOProud, both of whom weren’t invited to participate in this year’s conference. This despite the support of 73 percent of Americans between 18 and 29 years old for gay marriage and Christie being America’s most popular governor.

“Not only are [GOP leaders] out of touch with most Americans,” said GOProud co-founder Jimmy LaSalvia via email, “they don’t even know what their own base thinks.” The massive shift in attitudes toward gay rights, he argues, means that Republicans who don’t embrace tolerance will doom the party. “Until they are willing to publicly engage with gay Americans, they will continue to lose at the ballot box.”

Many members of the conservative establishment agree. MSNBC’s house righty, S.E. Cupp, pulled out of the conference over the exclusion of GOProud. And the blackballing of Christie raised the hackles of Wall Street Journal editorial page editor Paul Gigot, Fox News contributor Charles Krauthammer, and Rep. Peter King (R-NY), who told CNN that ignoring Christie was “a suicidal death wish.” But the president of one CPAC co-sponsor, Accuracy in Media, celebrated the decision and recommended “a panel on the dangers of the homosexual movement and why some of its members seem prone to violence, terror, and treason.”

One could reasonably conclude that CPAC organizers either put little trust in the intellectual agility of its participants (lest they be swayed by poisonous heresies) or believe that too many activists—the type who travel to ██████ for CPAC—would be offended by the heterodoxies of Christie and GOProud.

Indeed, a look at the 2013 CPAC speakers list doesn’t suggest the ACU is particularly worried about conservatism’s future. There’s a smattering of new blood—including the insurgent triumvirate of Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, and Marco Rubio. But attendees also will get a large serving of stale ideas from Gingrich, Sarah Palin, Allen West, Rick Santorum, Mitch McConnell, Wayne LaPierre, Rick Perry, and, of course, Mitt Romney. One revealing ideological omission, and one that has largely passed without comment, is the lack of neoconservative voices at the conference, save one panel discussion on Iran. And it’s perhaps indicative of the party’s drift toward more libertarian ideas that CPAC kicks off with a discussion called “Too Many American Wars? Should We Fight Anywhere and Can We Afford It?” Try getting that past the ACU in 2007.

John Boehner addresses the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), in Washington, February 18, 2010. (Cliff Owen/AP)

And one CPAC co-sponsor, the libertarian Competitive Enterprise Institute, has smuggled in a panel on gay rights. “A Rainbow on the Right: Growing the Coalition, Bringing Tolerance Out of the Closet” will feature a conversation with, among others, GOProud co-founder LaSalvia and National Review’s Jonah Goldberg, who recently complained that it’s one thing to oppose gay marriage but “quite another to say that dissenting gay groups—that is, conservative gay groups—can’t officially hand out fliers on the premises” of CPAC.

The instinct that there is something rotten—or at least broken—in modern conservatism isn’t limited to those on the party’s socially liberal, libertarian-leaning wing. In *The American Conservative*, Rod Dreher wrote recently that “even though ■ a middle-aged, churchgoing white right-winger who has not the slightest attraction to liberalism, I increasingly don’t want to be associated with what ‘conservative’ means here and now.” A number of conservative journalists I spoke with expressed similar dissatisfaction with the state of “the movement,” all chuckling when asked if they would be attending CPAC. Too many kooks, said one. Too much Gingrich and Trump, said another.

It’s funny, then, to see a panel discussion celebrating the legacy of sainted conservative intellectual William F. Buckley, a man who not only purged bonkers conspiracists like the John Birch Society but edited a magazine that openly and robustly debated gay rights. A 1978 article excoriated Pat Buchanan’s homophobia and the “irrational” conservative fear of homosexuality; a 1986 cover story was succinctly titled “A Conservative Speaks Out for Gay Rights.”

But here we are, in 2013, and conservatism’s biggest gathering wants to ensure that the Republican Party maintains ideological purity and the ability to consistently lose elections.
