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CPAC & The Right's Civil War

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Distinctly Catholic

The Conservative Political Action Conference opens in Washington today and the meeting is not only a stage for controversy this year, the meeting is itself controversial, largely because of a decision to allow the pro-gay rights Republican group, GOProud, to attend and have a booth.

When CPAC first convened 38 years ago, conservatism in America was adrift. Nixon was not their man. Hardcore conservatives had no stomach for the Clean Air Act, the Environmental Protection Agency, or détente with the Soviet Union. And, lest anyone forgot, Nixon proposed universal health insurance reforms too! But, there is a difference between being adrift and being at war, and today there is a brewing, three-sided war within the GOP between social conservatives and libertarians and old-style Chamber of Commerce Republicans.

Most of the attention has been focused on the differences between libertarians and social conservatives, but the struggle is a three-way split. Each of these sub-groups within the conservative movement and the GOP holds fast to some principles that the others find negligible if not abhorrent. Libertarians join with CofC Republicans in opposing government regulation but, the more principled libertarians want an end to the corporate welfare the CofC exists to secure also. Some libertarians share the social conservatives' concerns about abortion, but part ways with them on same sex marriage. As mentioned yesterday, business does not want to take the lead in opposing gay marriage because gays are among their customers. (Coors beer found a way to thread the needle well, hiring Dick Cheney's daughter to do the company's outreach to the gay community, I suppose on the theory that if you must give an LGBT person on staff, better to have one who supports the Iraq War!)

These struggles are not new. Patrick Allitt's 1993 book, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America: 1950-1985*, details how some Catholic thinkers tried to leaven American conservatism with

their ideas. (Unfortunately, it appears that my well dog-eared copy has been lent to someone as I can't find it in my library this morning for an exact quote.) Allitt, one of the nation's leading intellectual historians, showed how men like William Buckley and L Brent Bozell, Jr., began their efforts to influence conservatism: At the *Nation Review*, Bozell became the sparring partner of Frank Meyer, a libertarian, so these struggles for the soul of the conservative movement did not begin with the Tea Party. And, the social conservatism of Buckley and Bozell was different from the social conservatism of the Rev. Jerry Falwell and the evangelicals who followed him into the ranks of contemporary conservatism in the 1980s and 1990s in important ways. In the event, the quote I wanted from Allitt's book had to do with the fact that, in the 1950s, the big business wing of the GOP was simply too strong and too intellectually uninterested for the Catholic conservatives to make much of an impact, although Buckley's *Nation Review* would become the leading intellectual journal of the right.

These fissures within the right cannot go away because they represent different first principles that can not really be reconciled. Certainly, the hyper-individualism of the Ayn Rand libertarians has no echo with Catholic Social Thought. And, the monied interest is, like money itself, so bereft of principles ? think derivatives or the military-industrial complex or the drug lords ? that they share a kind of principled anti-principle: Let nothing get in the way of making a buck. Still, principles or not, it is the monied interest that has dominated conservative politics for most of American history as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. taught us in his 1946 book, *The Age of Jackson*, a book that should be on the bookshelf of every liberal in America.

At the moment, the central struggle appears to be between the libertarians the social conservatives and the chosen field of battle appears to be gay rights. The coalition cobbled together by Ronald Reagan is fraying and the GOP must find a candidate who can stitch it back together. And, Reagan is the model. Reagan was no philosopher but he was a man deeply committed to certain ideas. The fact that some of those ideas did not cohere didn't bother him because he never pushed them that far. The different strains within conservatism can't be reconciled philosophically, but there are any number of sound-bites that do the trick. The key is not to create a synthesis where not can be achieved. The key is to remain somewhat superficial. Reagan's heir looms and it is not a he.

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