



STREETCAR LINE

Young Americans, Old Freedoms

By Quin Hillyer on 9.10.10 @ 6:08AM

A few hundred conservative activists will be gathering at the Mayflower hotel in Washington D.C. today and tomorrow to celebrate one of the seminal events of the conservative movement, which happened 50 years ago on these same two days of the calendar. "A Tribute to Sharon: Celebrating 50 Years of Advancing Liberty" will commemorate the founding of Young Americans for Freedom and the adoption of what for 50 years has stood as the single best compendium of American conservative movement beliefs -- the Sharon Statement.

If you read the statement itself, you'll immediately grasp its eloquence and the importance of its timeless values. The statement, and the conference, deserve a column-cum-virtual-advertisement all their own, which will follow this paragraph. But there's a wonderful back story, too, so please stay tuned for later paragraphs even if the conference itself doesn't interest you (although it ought to do so).

For some reason, I'm one of the 12 speakers, although out of place in the midst of a list of conservative movement supermen that includes political analyst extraordinaire Michael Barone; former congressmen Barry Goldwater Jr., Robert Bauman and Jim Kolbe; historian Lee Edwards; former Reagan Administration officials and conservative stalwarts Don Devine and Wayne Thorburn; direct mail guru and conservative movement leader Richard Viguerie; and *American Spectator* publisher Al Regnery. And the keynote address for the Friday banquet will be federal appeals court judge and former U.S. Sen. James Buckley -- at whose family estate, Great Elm in Sharon, Conn., YAF and the Statement were launched under the tutelage of brother William F. Buckley. Sponsored by the Young Americas Foundation and the Fund for American Studies, this weekend's conference will look back at Sharon and forward to the "future of

freedom."

It's the look back that is of this column's immediate interest. There was a time when Young Americans for Freedom was the cutting edge of the conservative movement, the training ground for rising conservative leaders, and the most prominent and effective voice in countering the student radicals of the 1960s. (Thorburn has written a book about it all, which finally gives due credit to the organization. Do read it.) And it all started in Sharon on Sept. 10-11, 1960. My father, who passed away earlier this year, was there. I found in his files all his original YAF documents.

Imagine you are a conservative activist on a decidedly liberal campus down south. You receive a letter dated August 16, 1960, from recent Georgetown graduate Douglas Caddy and the "Interim Committee for a National Conservative Youth Organization" (the committee included Suzanne Regnery of the conservative publishing family, and Kolbe, later a congressman, and 10 other worthies). "America stands at the crossroads today," the letter opened. "Will our nation continue to follow the path towards socialism or will we turn towards Conservatism and freedom? The final answer to this question lies with America's youth... An intercollegiate society for Conservative youth has been in operation for several years... in bringing about a Conservative intellectual revival on the campus. Many feel that now is the time to organize a complementary nationwide youth movement which would be designed almost solely for political action -- implementing and coordinating the aspirations of Conservative youth into a dynamic and effective political force."

Sounds like old hat, right? Not back then. Nothing like this existed at the time. This was new. It was ground-breaking. Which is why the letter, presciently, went on: "The Sharon Conference can be of historic importance.... We hope you will agree with us on its importance and urge you to make your plans today to attend."

Only 120 people were invited. According to the list I have, only 86 attended. In addition to Dad, they included the aforementioned Jim Kolbe and Lee Edwards; path-breaking conservative journalist M. Stanton Evans; future Conservative Caucus president Howard Phillips; Philadelphia Society founder Don Lipsett; future *Richmond Times-Dispatch* editorial page editor and Pulitzer Prize finalist Ross Mackenzie; future federal appeals court judge Paul Niemeyer; *National Review* publisher William Rusher as an observer (who joked that because he was too old for YAF that made him an Old American for Freedom, or OAF); future American Conservative Union leader Carol Dawson; and future *Human Events* Editor Allan Ryskind -- among others who became major leaders in their fields.

In addition to adopting the Sharon Statement, those assembled had to choose a name. My dad recalls identifying several proposals as already being the names of "Communist front organizations" (he had recently made a study of the topic), which is why those names were nixed in favor of YAF. They adopted bylaws for the national organization. They had cocktails and played tennis. They had panel discussions. They watched films produced by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. They listened to remarks by WFB. They elected officers. Dad's notes from the break-out sessions record the repeated idea to "infiltrate existing organizations," which doubtless didn't have quite the cloak-and-dagger connotations then that it has today -- it seems to have meant not only getting involved in conservative groups but also bringing a conservative perspective to any group one joins -- but does in retrospect sound somewhat romantic. "Don't use *labels*," he wrote. "Start off talking about *policies*. Labels frighten; policies bring agreement." And "emphasize that conservatism is non-conformist" -- counterintuitive, but

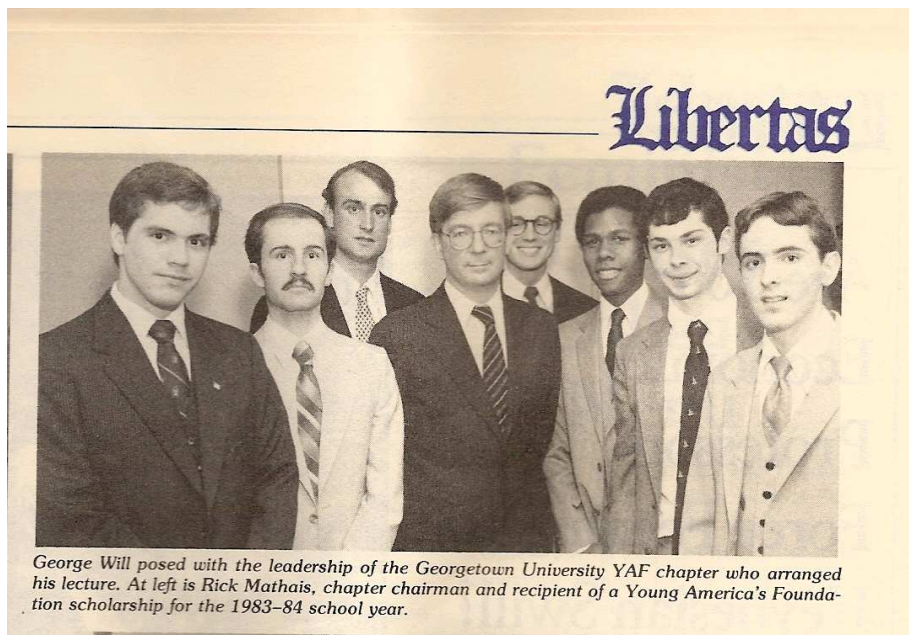
oh so true, and also a good sales point for college students who typically like to think of themselves as non-conformists even as they actually conform their thoughts, actions, and clothing to the reigning liberal orthodoxy.

WFB devoted a full column to YAF in the first subsequent issue of *National Review*: "A new organization was born last week and just possibly it will influence the political future of this country. ... Ten years ago the struggle seemed so long, so endless, even, that we did not even dream of victory. Even now the world continues to go left, but all over the land dumbfounded professors are remarking the extraordinary revival of hard conservative sentiments in the student bodies.... It may be that, as Russell Kirk keeps reminding us, the Struggle Availeth. No one would doubt it who talked to the founding fathers of the Young Americans for Freedom."

By the spring of 1961, YAF's national board of directors included another future appeals court judge, Diarmuid O'Scannlein, and boasted a national advisory board full of congressmen, leading thinkers, and writers such as John Dos Passos, academic deans, admirals and generals, and noted business leaders.

Back before the Internet and instant messaging, was there ever any other such a successful launch of a political organization for young people?

FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH, I lucked out when I got around to YAF at Georgetown in 1982. A guy named Richard Mathias had re-founded the group there that somehow had foundered since the time when Georgetown grad Douglas Caddy was the national organization's first executive director. Mostly through Mathias's work (and sometimes with financial support from Ron Robinson's Young America's Foundation), we sponsored a dazzling array of speakers that included George Will (oddly enough pushing an agenda at the time that was "more Lincolnesque" and "less Madisonian"), Morton Blackwell, rising star Lee Atwater, several Reagan Cabinet secretaries, U.S. Rep. Bob Livingston, Angelo Codevilla, Lyn Nofziger, Stan Evans, and economics professor and columnist Walter Williams. Three of our student board members became frequent writers for conservative publications: In addition to me, there were now-nationally syndicated columnist Deroy Murdock and Virginia politics professor/AEI scholar Gerard Alexander, who has written numerous pieces for the *Claremont Review of Books* and the *Weekly Standard*. The *Washington Post* sent a reporter to watch the anti-nuke ABC special *The Day After* with us and write about our reactions; and later the *Post* did a two-page profile of Murdock. (*Hillyer and Murdock are second and third from the right in the photo below, crowding a patient George Will.*)



Other YAF chapters across the country well into the 1980s, at least, were still experiencing similar success. The national YAF magazine *New Guard* was an amazingly fine publication. Murdock wrote for it. So did now-famous author Dinesh D'Souza, and Michelle Easton, who later founded the Clare Booth Luce Institute. So did Doug Bandow, who frequently writes for these pages. And Michael Boos, now vice president and general counsel for Citizens United (of campaign speech rights fame).

And now, in 2010, YAF is enjoying a bit of a resurgence under executive director Jordan Marks. It is a resurgence that should only strengthen with the attention brought by this weekend's conference. Which is all to the good, because it is again the case, as it was at Sharon, that "in this time of moral and political crisis, it is the responsibility of the youth of America to affirm certain eternal truths. We, as young conservatives, believe: That foremost among the transcendent values is the individual's use of his God-given free will, whence derives his right to be free from the restrictions of arbitrary force; that liberty is indivisible, and that political freedom cannot long exist without economic freedom;... [and] that American foreign policy must be judged by this criterion: does it serve the just interests of the United States?"

And what of today's youth? They, too, are re-embracing freedom. Polls show that young voters are now turning against Barack Obama. Freedom does have a future. And Americans, young and old, will lead it.

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