



Inside CPAC: How the political right's premier annual gathering became the Trump show

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The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), which once attracted a broad range of Republicans, is underway for another year. But the largest annual gathering for conservative activists has essentially become the Trump administration show.

Mr Trump is set to speak on Friday at the conference, which features sessions with titles such as “We Refuse to Be Suckers: The New Trump Doctrine” and “New Sheriff in Town: How Trump is Taking Down Lawless Government Agencies”. Around a dozen members of his administration, including Vice President Mike Pence, having already spoken or are due to speak during the four-day event.

Free trade has long been considered to be a conservative principle – but the President and his administration have espoused a protectionist agenda, part of Mr Trump’s “America First” approach. The latest edition of the conference is creating another platform for the President’s controversial policies on trade and immigration.

CPAC’s lineup boasts almost 60 big-name speakers – a sharp decrease from the reported 166-plus speakers the conference advertised last year. Along with pro-Trump politicians and political commentators like Sean Hannity, the 2018 CPAC’s speakers include right-wing populists Marion Maréchal-Le Pen of France, the niece of Front National (FN) leader Marine Le Pen, and Nigel Farage.

The conference already appeared to be moving further right last year, with the appearance of Steve Bannon. On the CPAC stage, Mr Bannon spoke of “economic nationalism” and “corporatist media”, ideas that he had carried to the White House from his time running Breitbart News. Despite Mr Bannon leaving the White House, past and current members of Breitbart are again present at CPAC this year.

At CPAC 2018, you are never far from pro-Trump sentiment. Some attendees walk around the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, the Maryland base for the conference, wearing “Make America Great Again” hats, possibly purchased at the Official Trump Store located next to a booth for the Institute for Free Speech. Books touting conservative ideology, as well as Mr

Trump's book "The Art of the Deal", can be purchased at the Conservative Book Club's bookstore.

Shiva Ayyadurai, who is challenging progressive Senator Elizabeth Warren for her Massachusetts Senate seat, has also set up his own booth. Those that walk by are handed a flyer ridiculing Ms Warren for her claims of Native American heritage. It features an edited photo of Ms Warren wearing a headdress underneath the slogan, "Only a REAL INDIAN Can Defeat the Fake Indian" – an apparent reference to Mr Trump's much maligned nickname for the Massachusetts senator of "Pocahontas".

While the scheduled speakers display CPAC's new populist tones, think tanks fill out the rest of the event's agenda. Booths for traditional conservative organisations, including the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute and the American Conservative Union, are all housed in a giant ballroom in the convention centre.

The appearance of Ms Maréchal-Le Pen was one that Matt Schlapp, the head of the American Conservative Union, which organises CPAC, had to defend against criticism from conservatives who had expressed dismay at her connection to the Front National, and her hardline views.

NRA chief Wayne LaPierre speaks at a CPAC event in Maryland

"Marion is a classical liberal, a conservative," Mr Schlapp wrote on Twitter about Ms Maréchal-Le Pen. He also told Fox News: "She's for traditional marriage, she's pro-life, she doesn't believe that the welfare state solves problems and, yes, she wants to make sure when people immigrate into France that they want to be French and love the country."

Former GOP communications director Tara Setmayer made clear that defence would not be enough. "Reason #1245 why I won't be attending CPAC anytime soon anymore. It used to be a must attend yearly event for decades for conservatives. Since Trump & Matt Schlapp took over... Milo was invited last year! Now Le Pen??" she tweeted.

As she spoke on Thursday, Ms Maréchal-Le Pen's speech was greeted warmly, with hearty boos greeting every mention of the European Union as she accused the bloc of "slowly killing" ancient nations. She joked that she was "less terrifying" than US media had said, but made clear her intentions.

"I'm not offended when I hear President Donald Trump say 'America first'," she said. "In fact, I want America first for the American people, I want Britain first for the British people and I want France first for the French people".

There was also an airing for a favourite chant of Mr Trump, after another speaker, Ben Shapiro of Daily Wire, recalled the fate of Democrat presidential nominee in 2016, Hillary Clinton.

"President Trump brought us one really fantastic thing, Hillary Clinton is not and will never be president of the United States," Mr Shapiro said as the crowd chanted "lock her up!" which had become a staple of Mr Trump's campaign rallies.

Outside of the speakers, the titles of some of the forums and sessions certainly caught the eye. One was “Kim Jong Un-iversity: How College Campuses are Turning into Reeducation Camps,” and there was also a session called “What You Don’t Know about the ‘Dirty Dossier,’ Trump, and Russia”.

Another theme that appears to be reflected in this year’s conference is Mr Trump’s hatred of the media, with one session being titled “An Affair to Remember: How the Far Left and the Mainstream Media Got in Bed Together”.

Away from some of the more outlandish elements, the conference is still the centre of the conservative political world for a few days. On Thursday, National Rifle Association chief executive Wayne LaPierre blasted the media for its coverage of another mass shooting last week and for “being eager to smear” the NRA, one of the most powerful gun-rights lobbying organisations.

The Parkland, Florida massacre last week that left 17 people dead has re-energised the heated gun control debate going into the annual political conference, which is meant to celebrate and discuss conservative principles, including support for the Second Amendment.