



What CPAC teaches us about the Republican worldview

Analysis: The conservative gathering projects a strictly America-centric view of the world.

By: Jean MacKenzie – March 15, 2013

“We don’t need a new idea,” said Sen. Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida. “The idea is called America, and it still works.”

Rubio was one of the headline speakers at the three-day Conservative Political Action Conference in National Harbor, Md., an event billed as the largest and oldest gathering of conservatives.

The line got enthusiastic applause, but it exposed one much-debated concept: speaker after speaker touted the idea that the United States remains “the greatest nation in the history of the world” — even despite what many claim is a failing economy, a dysfunctional government and a broken education system.

Ronald Reagan ruled as the guardian angel of CPAC, the beloved repository of wisdom and strength. By contrast, Mitt Romney was something of the specter at the feast, faulted by many for running a weak campaign, for failing to attack President Barack Obama firmly enough, and for not being sufficiently true to the conservative ideal.

His resounding defeat in November was not the fault of the conservative message, however.

“The popular media narrative is that this country has shifted away from conservative ideals,” said Texas Gov. Rick Perry, himself a failed presidential contender. “That might be true if Republicans had actually nominated conservative candidates.”

CPAC is, first and foremost, a beauty contest in which presidential hopefuls strut their stuff for the audience and the cameras. That might seem to be a ridiculous endeavor less than two months after the Democratic incumbent was sworn into his second term, but many of the big names appeared to be doing just that.

Day One was devoted to the GOP’s current favorites: matched against Rubio was Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, who shot to prominence last week with his now-famous 13-hour filibuster to highlight what he considered the dangers of the administration’s unrestricted and non-transparent drone program.

“I was told I get 10 measly minutes,” said Paul, to loud laughter as he took the stage. “But I brought 13 hours worth of information just in case.”

For many, Paul was the hero of the hour, greeted with “Stand with Rand” signs in the hall.

Neither man, however, is the popular front-runner. That honor belongs to New Jersey Gov. Christ Christie, who was the leading Republican in a Quinnipiac University poll conducted last week.

Yet Christie was not invited to CPAC, in what many saw as a slapdown for his embrace of President Obama during the Hurricane Sandy aftermath, just before November's election.

On Saturday, the conservative conference will take a straw poll of prospective nominees for the 2016 presidential election, which now features 23 names, including Rubio, Rand, and Christie. Another top contender, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, asked that his name not be entered, saying it is just too early.

But Friday's roster of speakers contained many others who may be looking for greater exposure in the long run-up to 2016. They projected a fairly unified message: Our country is exceptional, our country is good, our country is just plain better than all the rest.

There were some jarring notes, however.

The day was opened by entrepreneur and television personality Donald Trump, who warned of the "very very serious trouble" both the country and the Republican Party were in. The country had lost its momentum, and had to get it back, he insisted.

But he did have a novel approach to immigration. Remarking on recent proposals to grant a path to citizenship to illegal immigrants, he warned that "every single one of those 11 million illegals will be voting Democratic."

His solution: admit more Republicans. "Why don't we take more from Europe?" he asked, adding that he believes Europeans are often graduates of prestigious schools like Harvard and Wharton, and therefore perhaps more in sync with the Republican ethos.

His views on the United States' recent wars were also quite original.

Remarking that the Iraq War cost the United States \$1.5 trillion, he advised going in and seizing at least the equivalent amount of money in oil.

"We should take it, pay ourselves back," he insisted. "What the hell are we thinking? We get nothing."

For Kelly Ayotte, the junior senator from New Hampshire, and another politician looking for a possible spot on the 2016 ticket, security is the great concern.

"How many of you think that radical Islam is a threat to our way of life?" she asked, raising her hand high.

She condemned what she termed Obama's policies that "repeatedly undercut Israel," and all but called directly for military action to take out Iran's nuclear centrifuges.

"This is a matter of life and death for Israel," she reminded the audience.

Wayne LaPierre, president of the National Rifle Association, unsurprisingly touted the Second Amendment, which grants American citizens the right to bear arms.

"That freedom makes America stronger than other countries, and that freedom makes America better than other countries," he said succinctly.

Rick Santorum, who had, as he told the audience, come to CPAC from his nephew's deathbed, was fairly somber.

As is usual with Santorum, he frequently invoked the Almighty, and sounded his by now familiar indictment of the French Revolution.

The mottos of 1789 were good, he said, up to a point: “liberty” and “equality” sounded a lot like American values. But “fraternite” (brotherhood) scuttled the whole venture, in his view. It should have been “paternite” (Fatherhood) to signal that rights come from the Creator.

“They replaced a sovereign king with a sovereign mob,” he said. “That led to the guillotine and Bonaparte.”

That led to a “godless, anti-clerical Europe, where government is the center,” rather than the Deity.

That, he insisted, would not happen in America; not on his watch.

A panel on defense cuts sounded the alarm at a possible loss of American prestige, given the severe funding cuts instituted by the Obama administration.

But, as Christopher Preble, vice president at the Cato Institute, put it, the United States has got to stop being the world’s policeman.

“US troops should not be first responders to every 911 call that goes out [in the world],” he said. Preble also stressed that the United States should not be asked to “provide security for countries that cannot defend themselves.”

Some of the characterizations of foreign leaders might raise a few eyebrows, such as one speaker’s reference to “that nut-job in North Korea” or another’s laughing reference to Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan president who died March 5, now being “Satan’s roommate.”

Romney seemed much more temperate when he gave his long-awaited speech on Friday, his first major public appearance since the November election.

He refused to indulge in pessimism, saying the American people are strong, resilient, and will come back to the conservative message eventually — which they must do if America is to stay at the top of the world.

“It is no secret that the last century was an American century,” he said. “And it is no secret that over the span of the 21st century, America’s pre-eminent position is far from guaranteed. The consequence if America were to be surpassed would be devastating.”

America is the only country in the world to use its military hegemony exclusively for liberation, rather than conquest, he insisted.

“Who came to the rescue of Europe when it faced its darkest hour and came to the rescue of others under the threat of tyranny, in Korea, Vietnam, Panama, Bosnia, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq? Whatever you think of these interventions, whatever, the impulse behind every single one of them was liberation, not conquest,” Romney said. “In all of human history, there has never been a great power that has so often used that power to liberate others, to free the captives.”

Romney did mention his loss, at the end of his speech.

“I am sorry that I will not be your president — but I will be your co-worker and I will stand shoulder to shoulder with you,” he said. “In the end, we will win just as we have won before, and for the same reason: because our cause is right ... and just.”

Perhaps he'd better have a word with Donald Trump on Iraqi oil, just in case.