



Conservatives' Real Agenda Revealed at CPAC Conference: Love of Torture and Hatred of Obama

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At first, the opening roster of speakers at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference sounded a common theme: How many ways can conservatives -- a term repurposed to describe the Tea Party movement -- threaten the establishment of the Republican Party? Given the exuberant response of the CPAC crowd to those who expressed it, you'd be forgiven for thinking you had walked into a gathering of a coherent movement.

Then Dick Cheney, the former vice president, a guardian of the Republican establishment, took the stand in a surprise appearance, and the crowd went wild. When he teasingly said their reception had him thinking about running for office again, they cheered. When he immediately dashed that hope, their deflation was audible.

The speakers preceding the Cheney apparition brought the crowd to their feet decrying government spending and bailouts. The gathering had its own internal, if paranoid, logic. Yet when Cheney appeared, the profligacy and bailout schemes of the Bush administration seemed long forgotten. Never mind that George W. Bush, Cheney's boss and protege, "increased government spending more than any of the six presidents preceding him, including LBJ," according to Veronique de Rugy of the Mercatus Center. (De Rugy, a former research analyst at the Cato Institute and former fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, continues: "In his last term in office, President Bush increased discretionary outlays by an estimated 48.6 percent. During his eight years in office, President Bush spent almost twice as much as his predecessor, President Clinton. Adjusted for inflation, in eight years, President Clinton increased the federal budget by 11 percent. In eight years, President Bush increased it by a whopping 104 percent.")

Opening speaker Marco Rubio, the Tea Party challenger to Charlie Crist, the GOP establishment's candidate for Florida's U.S. Senate seat, not only railed against government spending but recently expressed his opposition to repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that allows for the expulsion of LGBT people from the military. He was followed by Sen. Jim DeMint, who is against everything gay, and has even called for barring gays and lesbians from teaching in public schools.

Later in the program, Dick Armey, the former House Majority Leader and current chairman of the astroturf group, FreedomWorks, graced the stage. He's not exactly a champion of gay rights. (Armey once referred to openly gay Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank as "Barney Fag.")

This is a pretty anti-gay crowd. Anti-gay literature abounds. At the top of an escalator, I was greeted by a young man who sweetly handed me a flier titled, "To Keep Our Honor Clean:

Why We Must Oppose the Homosexual Agenda for the Military." Yet no one seemed to notice that Cheney had essentially endorsed the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" this past weekend, when, in an appearance on ABC's "This Week," he noted that times had changed and he was willing to accept the judgment of military leaders, who have expressed a desire to do away with the policy. (Cheney's daughter, Mary, is a lesbian.)

Then there's the Constitution, the Constitution, the beloved Constitution -- a document fetishized by this movement, though perhaps read by few among the ranks. How else to explain the crowd's adulation of Cheney, champion of the U.S.A. PATRIOT Act, a piece of legislation that reduced the Constitution to less than a penumbra of its former self?

Unless, perhaps, there are priorities more important to this crowd than its leaders' stated principles -- priorities that Cheney represents despite his many transgressions against the dogma of the Tea Party nation. Since his departure from the Old Executive Office Building, Cheney has repeatedly sounded two assertions: that torture and other transgressions of human rights keep Americans safe from terrorism; and that President Obama and his administration are incompetent and cowardly in the arena of national security. Those two notions are easily distilled to: torture is patriotic, and Obama is an idiot or something even worse -- a tyrant who wants to take away our right to torture. On those two ideas, virtually all the speakers at today's event could agree.

Indeed, Day One of CPAC was brought to us by the letter "T" -- for torture, tyranny and teleprompter. Torture (or "enhanced interrogation techniques") in the CPAC universe is a very good thing. Tyranny is a dog-whistle to the gun-toters who are looking for a reason for armed revolution. Even the founders upheld the people's right to overthrow a tyrant, you know. Teleprompter is right-wing code for their perceived limitations of the president's abilities. He's not a real thinker, he just reads a teleprompter really well, goes the reasoning. It's a trick, like something you can teach a precocious child.

As I entered the packed ballroom at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel, Marco Rubio was minutes into his speech, criticizing the Obama administration's prosecution of terrorists, who, "after we get useful information from them," should be "brought to justice in front of a military tribunal in Guantanamo -- not a civilian courtroom in Manhattan," he said. Many in the crowd rose to their feet. Rubio also suggested that Obama was bent on creating in America the very circumstances that led Rubio's parents to flee their native Cuba after the Castro revolution.

"Now, I must decide," Rubio said, "do I want my children to grow up in a country like the one I grew up in, or one like the one my parents grew up in?"

Oh -- and of course there was a teleprompter joke. Last week's snowstorm in Washington, he said, prevented Obama from "find[ing] anywhere to set up a teleprompter to announce new taxes."

For his part, DeMint spent a good bit of his speech bashing the very Republican establishment that Dick Cheney represents. He gloated over the primary challenges his political action committee, the Senate Conservatives Fund, has launched to establishment candidates, such as that posed by Rubio to Crist. The senator, who promised to "break"

Obama via the fight over health care reform, suggested that "America is teetering towards tyranny," leaving few to wonder just who the tyrant in question is. He described the president's policies as "socialist," policies, he said, "that have been the enemy of freedom for centuries all over the world."

He also suggested the Obama administration was "giv[ing] away our precious Constitutional rights to foreign terrorists who want to destroy us."

Oh, yeah, and a teleprompter jab. "You can't govern from a teleprompter," DeMint said. "Just because you are good on TV doesn't mean you can sell socialism to freedom-loving Americans."

Dick Arney, who has rather brilliantly marshaled the rage of the Tea Party, showed the Republican Party just how much a pain he could be when he messed up the congressional race in New York State's 23rd district by backing a third-party candidate because the local Republican Party candidate chosen for that special election wasn't sufficiently conservative for Arney's taste. A herd of FreedomWorks activists came into the district, campaigned against the Republican candidate, and effectively handed the race to the Democrat. Yet the same people who cheered Arney at CPAC went nuts for Cheney, Mr. Republican himself. What could the two possibly have in common?

To be fair to Arney, he's not known for condoning torture or the denial of constitutional rights to foreigners charged with crimes on American soil; he just supports candidates who do -- for instance Scott Brown, who won the Massachusetts Senate seat vacated by Ted Kennedy's death, and did so with a good bit of help from FreedomWorks and Arney's Tea Party legions. (Brown was a surprise speaker today at CPAC, receiving a rock star's welcome.) So, maybe there's the torture thing. But despite the mutual contempt of the two Dicks for each other, they do share a unifying cause: abiding contempt for Obama.

Speaking as if he were addressing the president, Arney said, "You have no ability; you only have talent." You know, just like what white chauvinists used to say about black jazz musicians, who were, in the supremacists' estimation, all idiot savants.

Oh, and I almost forgot -- a teleprompter reference. Standing at a podium flanked by the prompters' telltale glass panels, Arney, who spoke off the cuff, said, "By the way, what are these things? I always thought if you knew what you were talking about and had something in your heart to say, you didn't need them."

By the time Cheney found his way to the podium, he didn't really need to sound his signature themes of bashing Obama's competence, defending torture and the military tribunals at Guantanamo. He had been validated by all who came before him, most notably his daughter Liz, who brought him to the stage. The elder Cheney kept his judgment of the president to a terse prediction that Obama would be "a one-term president."

Liz Cheney, who said she customarily runs her big speeches by her dad, carried his water for him. The Obama administration's "incompetence," she said, is the kind "that gets people killed." The attempted Christmas Day bombing of a U.S. airliner, she said, was evidence

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of "incompetence, misjudgment and presidential neglect." And on planet CPAC, that was something on which everyone could agree, be they rock-ribbed Republicans, or the raucous rump known as the Tea Party.

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