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Live from the Reagan Building

In February of 2005, less than a month after George W. Bush was inaugurated for his second term as president of the United States, more than four thousand conservative activists from all over the country gathered in Washington, D.C., for the thirty-second annual Conservative Political Action Conference—or CPAC, for short. While most Americans have never heard of CPAC (it's pronounced like C-SPAN and features a similar number of congressmen), its organizers have called it "the conservative movement's yearly family reunion." That's a pretty accurate description. And with the Republican Party having just held on to the presidency by a convincing margin and increased its majorities in the House and the Senate, this was one big, influential, happy family.

In fact, maybe it was a little too happy.

As the devotees of the party of small government and anti-Washington fervor pitched their tent for three days inside the palatial Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center—a billion-dollar federal boondoggle in downtown D.C. that the Republican Congress named after the Gipper in 1995, in an act of

unintentional irony—a question hung in the air: what on earth are we doing here?

Not just in the giant government building, of course—though these were the swankest digs the conference had ever had. But what was the party of Ronald Reagan ("Government is not the solution to our problem, government *is* the problem") and Barry Goldwater ("I fear Washington and centralized government more than I do Moscow") doing dominating Washington in the first place? What does a movement do when it has spent decades arguing that the government should have less power, and then it takes control of the government? Does it stick to its principles and methodically find ways to tax less, spend less, and interfere less in the lives of Americans? Or does it slowly but surely—day by day, issue by issue, bill by bill—succumb to the temptations of power and start to wield it toward new ends?

These were unfamiliar and uncomfortable questions for conservatives—questions, quite frankly, that they had been doing their best to avoid.

For months after the 2004 election, the main pastime of the conservative movement was simply basking in the afterglow of a stupendously successful campaign season. And conservatives had every right to gloat. The Republican Party had certainly held its share of power over the past few decades, but it had never seen anything like this. Bush might not exactly have won in a landslide by any conventional standard, but 51 percent of the popular vote over John Kerry's 48 percent certainly felt like a landslide after four years spent living under the cloud of the 2000 Florida recount. And the Republicans now had 55 seats in the Senate (a gain of 4 seats) and 232 seats in the House (a gain of 5 seats).

President Reagan had to deal with a Democratic Congress in the 1980s; George H. W. Bush faced similar problems. The Republican Congress could only rein in President Clinton, not set an agenda of its own, in the 1990s, and even George W. Bush's first term was a wash for the GOP when liberal Republican senator James Jeffords of Vermont defected and became an independent, briefly giving Democrats back control of the Senate.

But now this was the Republicans' hour, and they weren't going to let anyone forget it.

Days after the election, presidential adviser Karl Rove took to the airwaves, trumpeting the president's "strong, convincing" vote on NBC's *Meet the Press* with Tim Russert. "This country was a narrowly divided country in 2000," he said. But no longer. "The country has slid to a 51–48 Republican majority."[1]

Comparing Bush to Franklin Delano Roosevelt—the last president to win reelection while adding to his party's numbers in the House and Senate—Rove said that while there are no literal "permanent majorities" in American politics, there are some that last for a couple of decades. Or, as in the case of the Roosevelt coalition (which brought together small farmers in the Midwest, urban political bosses, intellectuals, organized labor, Catholics, Jews, and African Americans in support of the New Deal), they can sometimes last fifty or sixty years.

"Would I like to see the Republican Party be the dominant party for whatever time history gives it the chance to be? You bet," Rove told Russert. In an interview with the *Washington Post* that appeared the same day as his *Meet the Press* appearance, Rove said that America was likely witnessing a "rolling realignment" toward total Republican Party dominance of national politics.[2]

Cue scary music.

By smoothing off its rough, small-government edges, Rove's theory goes, the GOP can pick off ever-bigger chunks of the Democrats' base: working-class voters can be won over by dropping traditional Republican objections to generous spending on entitlement programs; black, Hispanic, and Catholic voters can be won over with ever-harsher attacks on abortion and homosexuality; big business can be kept on board through ever-larger corporate subsidies and tax breaks, and so on and so forth. By being as many things to as many people as possible, according to the theory, the Republican Party may be able to eclipse the Democratic Party for decades to come. Bush is the test case.

If anyone was listening more closely to Rove than the president whom he'd twice helped elect, it was the Democrats, terrified that

these rumblings about "realignment" and a "permanent" Republican majority—which had been going on for years, and which had only been amplified by the tragedy of 9/11 and the American public's lack of confidence in liberals on national security—were more than just rumblings.

In fact, it would probably be fair to say that liberals entered full panic mode. After the 2000 election, there had been a lot of talk about Red America vs. Blue America—Red being Republican, religious, and rural, and Blue being Democratic, secular, and urban. But after the 2004 election, people started drawing up new flags and currencies. One map circulated on the Internet annexed the West Coast and the Northeast to the "United States of Canada"—located just north of "Jesusland."

On a slightly more serious note, the *Stranger*—a liberal alternative weekly newspaper in Seattle—wrote about what it called the Urban Archipelago. "Liberals, progressives, and Democrats do not live in a country that stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Canada to Mexico. We live on a chain of islands," the editors wrote. "We are citizens of the Urban Archipelago, the United Cities of America. We live on islands of sanity, liberalism, and compassion."[3]

More mainstream moping by Democrats could be seen all over the American media landscape: from *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd ranting about a "jihad in America" that "controls all power in the country," to New York's senator Chuck Schumer appearing on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* the day after the election and complaining that Democrats keep getting "paddled" and "outfoxed," to the liberal online magazine *Slate* running a series of articles on the topic of "Why Americans Hate Democrats."

Despair was the order of the day for Democrats, jubilation the order of the day for Republicans. But did either side even begin to comprehend the fix that the Republican Party was now in? If only they could have seen the scene at CPAC.

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If the conservative movement is a family, it's a far-flung, rowdy, dysfunctional one. But CPAC brings it all together.

If only for three days.

But for those three days, all the brothers and sisters, crazy aunts and sleazy uncles, barely tolerated in-laws and disgruntled stepchildren, black sheep and golden boys, and grandmas and grandpas of "the movement" (as those in the family are known to call it) are under one roof. It's a bit like the holidays—inasmuch as there's a reason the suicide rate spikes around the holidays.

Various bizarre scenes unfold all around. An iMac plays footage of Ronald Reagan on a loop. Republican committeemen from the Midwest can be overheard debunking the theory of evolution while waiting in line for dinner ("What do you call an animal with a half-fin–half-wing? Kibble."). Al Franken and G. Gordon Liddy face off over at Radio Row. And books full of Antonin Scalia's dissenting opinions are given out as party favors.

Meanwhile, a walk around CPAC's convention floor takes one on something of a whirlwind tour of the Right. There, the ninety-plus organizations and corporations that sponsor the conference set up booths to push their pet causes: Americans for Tax Reform ("reforming" taxes to within an inch of their lives), Americans for Immigration Control (keeping Mexicans in Mexico), the Family Research Council (keeping gays out of marriage), the Log Cabin Republicans (wedding gays to the GOP), the Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute (grooming the next generation of Ann Coulters), the National Rifle Association (defending the right to shoot), the Drug Policy Alliance (defending the right to shoot up), the Objectivist Center (deifying Ayn Rand), and the National Right to Work Foundation (demonizing the unions). Just to name a few.

As in most large families, however, there is one marriage that undergirds the entire enterprise: for the conservative family, that is the marriage between social conservatism and small-government conservatism. There is no one group at CPAC—or anywhere else, for that matter—that fully represents either of these philosophies. Rather, these are the two main currents of thought that push the conservative movement along. Social conservatives (a.k.a.

traditionalists, the Christian Right, the Religious Right) place the highest value on tradition and morality—or "Western values," as they often put it. Small-government conservatives (a.k.a. libertarians) value human freedom and choice above all else.

These two kinds of conservatives, whose fundamental views of the world are at odds as often as not, were brought together in the 1950s and 1960s by a concept known as "fusionism," the brainchild of conservative thinker Frank Meyer, an editor at *National Review* from its earliest days and a tireless movement activist until his death in 1972. In Meyer's formulation, social conservatives and libertarians should be natural political allies. Not only are their goals compatible, he argued, but also their philosophies are complementary, if not codependent. Either philosophy, if not reined in by the other, risks veering wildly off the tracks.

At CPAC, watching anti-immigration activists frothing at the mouth and calling illegal immigrants "burglars" and "wage thieves" and watching libertarians selling T-shirts urging "Capitalists of the world unite," it's not hard to see how that might happen.

Meyer began expounding his theory in a series of essays in *National Review* in 1956. It boiled down to a simple formulation: no act is truly moral unless it is freely chosen. While Meyer agreed with social conservatives about the importance of moral order, he feared that they were so wrapped up in preserving Western tradition that they were willing to resort to authoritarianism to achieve their goals. At the same time, while Meyer was in sympathy with libertarians and their emphasis on the need for a limited state, he feared that their philosophy was prone to degenerate into the pursuit of freedom for its own sake, free of any moral boundaries.

As Meyer wrote: "Truth withers when freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it. . . . Free individualism uninformed by moral value rots at its core and soon surrenders to tyranny."

What's more, Meyer argued, social conservatives had a vested interest in the small government pursued by libertarians. It was the government, particularly the federal government, that was to blame for what many perceived at the time to be America's moral

decay. As conservative writer David Frum summed up Meyer's thinking: it was federal judges who were banning prayer in schools; it was city planners destroying inner cities with their highways and public-housing projects; it was New Deal welfare programs fostering illegitimacy. The way to achieve social conservatives' goals, Meyer argued, was to beat back big government. In other words, in a conservative society, libertarian means would achieve traditionalist ends.[4]

It was a clever argument, especially in light of the threat from "Godless" international communism, which was despised equally by libertarians and social conservatives. And to the extent that the conservative movement has congealed and succeeded in the decades since Meyer began pushing it, that success—first within the Republican Party and then on the national stage—has been due to the libertarian and social-conservative factions sticking together.

These partners got the Republican Party to nominate Barry Goldwater, a libertarian-conservative and militantly anti-Communist U.S. senator from Arizona, for president in 1964. While Goldwater lost that race in a spectacular fashion, getting less than 40 percent of the popular vote, his candidacy committed the Republican Party to the cause of conservatism.

Out of Goldwater's failed campaign rose many of the pillars of the modern conservative movement. An out-of-work actor and former Democrat named Ronald Reagan launched his political career during the 1964 campaign with a rousing, nationally televised speech, "A Time for Choosing," in support of Goldwater. The antifeminist icon Phyllis Schlafly, best known today for her fight against the Equal Rights Amendment, first became known for writing a pro-Goldwater book, *A Choice, Not an Echo*, attacking the liberal Republican establishment that had elected Dwight Eisenhower and nominated Richard Nixon for turning the party into a weak imitation of the Democrats. And last but not least, the idea for the American Conservative Union—which founded and runs CPAC and serves as something of an umbrella organization for the conservative movement—was born in a meeting just five days after

Goldwater's defeat, with the idea of carrying on the fight begun in the 1964 campaign.

From these humble beginnings, the conservative movement went on to elect Reagan as president in 1980 and 1984. It turned over control of both houses of Congress to the Republican Party in 1994. It elected Bush in 2000. And it reelected him, with increased margins in Congress, in 2004.

So why was all not well in the Republican Party in the months after Bush's reelection? Why, as Democrats wept over the election returns, did a significant segment of the conservative movement weep with them? Why, as activists and students and journalists gathered for CPAC, was there a distinct sense that something was amiss?

Because the marriage at the heart of the conservative movement was falling apart.

To be sure, the relationship has had its rocky patches before. It has always been more *Married with Children* than *Ozzie and Harriet*. Whatever alliances have been formed, libertarians have always tended to see social conservatives as rubes ready to thump nonbelievers on the head with the Bible first chance they get, and social conservatives have always tended to see libertarians as dope-smoking devil worshippers.

The exaggeration is only slight. In 1957, the Communist-turned-social-conservative Whittaker Chambers famously wrote of libertarian favorite Ayn Rand that "from almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: 'To a gas chamber—go!'" In 1961, Ronald Hamowy, reviewing the first years of *National Review*'s existence for the libertarian *New Individualist Review*, blasted editor William F. Buckley Jr. and his colleagues for plotting to reintroduce the burning of heretics. In 1969, a libertarian delegate to the conservative youth group Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), which was holding a convention in St. Louis, burned his draft card on the floor of the convention hall—sparking a physical confrontation and the tossing out of three hundred libertarian YAF members.

The split under way between libertarians and social conservatives today is less dramatic than those of the past—there are no punches being thrown (yet), and Nazi analogies in contemporary politics are usually confined to the MoveOn.org crowd—but it is far more profound.

This time, the split is not a spat. It is a slow but sure breaking apart.

The sides here are not arguing over one unpopular war, as they were during Vietnam. They are not arguing about any of the various vagaries and fine points of conservative thought that have fueled so many heated internal debates over the decades. They are not fighting over one administration's failure to rein in the size of government, as some conservatives did during the Reagan years.

Today, no longer bound together by the Cold War or opposition to Bill Clinton and having tasted power at the small price of bending their beliefs, the two sides are fighting over nothing less than whether the Republican Party will complete its abandonment of the very principle upon which their fusionist marriage has been based these many years: a commitment to limited government.

Will social conservatives continue to accept federally funded "character education" in lieu of education reforms that would let parents choose their children's schools? Will they continue to accept billions of dollars of government money channeled to religious charities in lieu of reducing the tax burden on Americans so that they could give more money to charity themselves? Will they continue to accept the idea of government as nanny, protecting children from sex and violence in TV shows, movies, video games, and every other conceivable medium, in lieu of demanding a society in which parents are expected to be responsible for their own children? Will they continue to embrace the machinery of federal power they once feared, simply because the "good guys" are the ones pulling the levers for the time being?

In other words, can social conservatives and libertarians return to the common ground they once shared, or will their differences grow irreconcilable?

The early signs are less than encouraging.

The Bush administration, steered by the thinking of Karl Rove, has adopted a philosophy of big-government conservatism, which joins unrestrained government spending to an aggressive appeal to religious conservatives. It is a philosophy that has led Bush and the Republican Congress to create a $1.2 trillion Medicare prescription-drug benefit, making Bush the first president in a generation to create a new federal entitlement program. It is a philosophy that has led the president to support a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, which would override the decisions of several state governments on a matter that has traditionally been left to the states. It is a philosophy that has led the president and Congress to undertake a highly politicized intervention into a painful family medical decision, in the case of Terri Schiavo in Florida. And ultimately it is a philosophy that has the Republican Party running hard and fast away from the ideas that have been the underpinning of the conservative movement since before Goldwater.

Rove arrived on the first day of CPAC, following morning talks on "How the Good Guys Won" and "How the Bad Guys Tried to Stop Us," to remind conservatives of how far they'd come and to present a plan for where he promised to take them next.

Rove—the man the president had dubbed "the Architect" in his 2004 victory speech, delivered in the very same building just over three months before—reminded the crowd of how Lyndon Johnson won the presidency in a landslide forty years ago. After that election, the Democrats held 68 Senate seats, 295 House seats, and 33 governorships. Liberalism was far and away the nation's dominant political philosophy, and the Democrats were unquestionably the country's governing party.

Now all that had changed. The numbers bore repeating: Republicans now had 55 Senate seats, 232 House seats, and 28 governorships. They had won seven of the last ten presidential elections. The Republicans of 2004 weren't quite the Democrats of 1964—but they were on their way.

How had they gotten there? Where were they going?

Rove's talk was as notable for what it didn't say as for what it did. Not once did Rove proclaim the importance of reducing the size and scope of government. Not once did he echo Reagan's warning that government *is* the problem and not the solution. Nowhere to be found was Goldwater's wisdom that "a government big enough to give you everything you want is also big enough to take away everything you have."

Quite the contrary.

Far from reaffirming the Republican Party's past, Rove rebuked it. In the past, he said, the Republican Party had been "reactionary" and infected with "pessimism." He lamented that "for decades, Democrats were setting the agenda and liberals were setting the pace of change and had the visionary goals.

"But times change, and often for the better," Rove said. Now "this president and today's conservative movement are shaping history." Whereas the conservative movement was once a "small, principled opposition," it was now "broad and inclusive" and "confident and optimistic and forward-leaning" and—the word choice here might have been more revealing than Rove intended, so why not italicize it—"*most important of all, dominant*."

There is, of course, always a trade-off in politics between "small and principled" and "broad and inclusive." The trick, for people who care about the principle part of the equation, is to balance the two so that one's party has the support to win elections and the integrity for those wins to mean something. The question, then, is whether the Republican Party and the conservative movement have come to believe that simple dominance really is "most important of all."

There's significant reason to believe that they have. Having lost confidence that they can sell the American people on the need for smaller government, both the party and the movement have shifted their strategy from fighting big government to trying to co-opt it.

If Rove was doing anything up there on that stage at CPAC, he was forcefully rejecting the image and agenda of the Republican Party as it existed during the Gingrich years. In those heady days back in 1994, the GOP took control of both houses of

Congress—after forty years of unbroken Democratic rule in the lower chamber—on the strength of the Contract with America, which promised "the end of government that is too big, too intrusive, and too easy with the public's money." The Republicans seemed ascendant back then. Not only had the American people elevated the GOP, but they had also slapped down Clinton for his overreaching national-health-care plan. But the revolution went off course, and in doing so, it provided a cautionary example that convinced many conservatives to see small government as a losing political proposition.

As conservative commentator David Brooks wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* in a piece ahead of the 2004 elections, if one wanted to put a "death date" on the tombstone of the Republican Party's commitment to small government, it would be November 14, 1995.[5] That was when the newly minted Republican majority shut down the federal government as part of a dispute with the president over the budget. The Republicans, proposing a number of cuts, were spoiling for a fight over the size of government. Clinton let them have it—in more ways than one.

While each side tried to blame the other for the impasse, the Republicans just couldn't get the better of Bill Clinton. They expected the public to be on their side. "People who know the facts overwhelmingly support our view that it is time to end big government," Republican House majority leader Dick Armey said a few days into the shutdown.[6] Republican senator Phil Gramm of Texas, never one to back down from a fight, said at one point that the government could stay shut down as far as he was concerned, joking, "Have you really noticed a difference?"[7] The public wasn't amused. The Republican Party got slammed in the polls, and the Gingrich Revolution was set back irreparably—traumatizing an entire generation of GOP legislators.

(Fittingly enough, it was also during the government shutdown that Clinton began his affair with Monica Lewinsky, setting in motion another chain of events that would end badly for the Republicans—cementing their image as, to use Rove's words, pessimistic and reactionary.)

After the government-shutdown debacle, the Republicans began searching for a new approach. The American people might hate big government in theory, the new thinking went, but at the same time they don't have much appetite for seeing government programs that they've become attached to get slashed.

Thus Texas governor George W. Bush came onto the scene in 1999, groomed by a woman named Karen Hughes and backed by a shadowy figure named Rove, with something called "compassionate conservatism." The phrase made conservative stalwarts bristle (was conservatism in and of itself somehow less than compassionate? they asked), and it made liberal partisans titter (did Republicans really think they could disguise their coldhearted agenda behind a linguistic trick, they asked?)—but there was far more substance behind the phrase than any of the skeptics realized at the time.

This wasn't the old Republican agenda of cutting taxes and the government programs they fund gussied up with a little rouge and lipstick. This was a different animal entirely. "Too often, my party has confused the need for limited government with a disdain for government itself," Bush said during the 2000 campaign. He derided the idea that "if government would only get out of our way, all our problems would be solved." He called this a "destructive mind-set" with "no higher goal, no nobler purpose, than 'Leave us alone.'" Instead, Bush said, America needed less "sprawling, arrogant, aimless government" and more "focused and effective and energetic government."[8]

To skeptics, that sounded an awful lot like saying America needed less *bad* big government and more *good* big government—with "bad" meaning Democrat-controlled and "good" meaning Republican-controlled.

The skeptics are still waiting to be proved wrong.

Judging by CPAC 2005, which dedicated virtually its entire middle day to the issue of out-of-control spending (panels included "Cutting Spending Is Tough Work, but Somebody Has to Do It" and "They Take and Spend What We Earn but Won't Let Us Save It"), it sure didn't sound like Republican big government had

turned out to be any more "focused and effective and energetic" than Democratic big government.

In fact, quite the opposite. If anything, one-party big government run by Republicans has turned out to be a massively bloated endeavor. According to the conservative Heritage Foundation, federal spending grew twice as fast in Bush's first term as it did under Clinton—and the bulk of the growth was in nondefense spending. What's more, the spending hasn't been turned toward any particularly conservative ends. The president's signature education law, No Child Left Behind, boosted federal spending on education 137 percent from 2001 to 2006, while all but abandoning free-market education reforms such as vouchers and charter schools. There was nothing conservative about the massive giveaway of subsidies to farmers in 2002. And there was precious little conservative about the Medicare prescription-drug benefit in 2003.

Some conservatives may believe they are co-opting big government. In reality, it is co-opting them.

What's striking, however, is just how dependent big-government conservatism is on the War on Terror. Bush's compassionate conservatism lost the popular vote in 2000. And to the extent that Republicans succeeded electorally in 2002 and 2004, it was based on the president's decision to take a hard line in the War on Terror far more than on any domestic policy innovations.

Just what would have happened to a George W. Bush administration in more placid times? He entered office badly damaged by the election controversy in Florida. A liberal Republican senator defected, giving the Democrats control of the Senate. If not for the boost in support Bush gained after 9/11, his party might well have lost seats in the 2002 midterm elections. Come 2004, the "soccer moms" turned "terror moms" would still have been soccer moms, inclined to vote Democratic. Conservatives would have been unimpressed with Bush's conservatism; liberals would have been unimpressed with his compassion.

Of course, that's not how it happened. And to say that the Republican Party is winning elections because it's right on the War on Terror is hardly an indictment. What's worrying, however, is

that conservatives who have long pined for activist government have found in the War on Terror the key to crafting an overarching theme.

In his speech at CPAC, Rove explained that the primary factor behind the realignment he sees occurring in American politics is that the Republicans are "seizing the mantle of idealism." Idealism used to be the preserve of liberals, he said, but Reagan changed all that when he vowed to end communism, not just to contain it. Now Bush was building on that legacy. "President Bush's eventual goal is the triumph of freedom and the end of tyranny," Rove said. "This vision . . . is consistent with the deep idealism of the American people."

What's more, having seized the banner of idealism abroad, it was now possible to connect Bush's domestic agenda to a more sweeping vision: spreading freedom abroad and at home.

"Our goal as conservatives must be to put government on the side of progress and reform, modernization and greater freedom, more personal choice and greater prosperity," Rove told the CPAC crowd, echoing any number of speeches Bush gave on the campaign trail in 2004. "The great goal of modern conservatism is to make our society more free, more prosperous, and more just."

These lines received light applause from the crowd. Republicans were going to need more energy than that to fulfill Rove's ambitious agenda. The Republican Party, he said, needed to "reform" the tax code, health care, pension plans, the legal system, public education, and worker training; it needed to "build" an Ownership Society of homes and businesses, and it needed to "prepare" Americans for meeting "the challenges of a free society." But that's not all. It also needed to "build" a culture of life, "support" religious charities, and "foster" a culture of "service and citizenship."

If this wasn't activist government, it's hard to say what would be. But Rove wasn't quite done. "Republicans cannot grow tired or timid," he said. "We have been given the opportunity to govern, and now we have to show that we deserve the respect and trust of our fellow citizens."

This was all a long way from thirty years ago, when California's

governor Ronald Reagan told the libertarian magazine *Reason* that "the very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism," the desire for "less government interference," "less centralized authority," and "more individual freedom."

Conservatives had backed a wartime president in a tough reelection campaign, but were they really comfortable with resuming the era of big government, as long as it was all under conservative auspices? Was this really the new heart and soul of conservatism?

Over the course of three days at CPAC, it became clear that while conservatives were ecstatic over their recent victories, they were deeply divided as to whether to move into the new edifice the Architect was busy building.

Some were quite eager.

Take, for instance, Ohio's secretary of state (and Republican candidate for governor in 2006), Kenneth Blackwell, who spoke on "Marriage as a Winning Issue in 2004 and Beyond." Blackwell, who is African American, credited opposition to gay marriage—along with the Republican Party's general social conservatism—for boosting Bush's vote among Catholic and black voters far above his 2000 showing. Bush's share of the black vote in Ohio, he noted, went to 16 percent in 2004, up from 9 percent in 2000. "I want to be sure that there are no revisionists here among us," Blackwell said. "The reality is that the values voters won Ohio and won the presidency for George Bush."

This was a recurring theme over the three days, that "values voters," social conservatives, religious conservatives—whatever one wanted to call them—were now the real linchpin of the Republican coalition. These voters had often been ignored and treated shabbily by the Republican Party, the argument went, but now they'd proven that when the GOP caters to them on issues such as gay marriage, stem-cell research, abortion, obscenity on TV, and judicial nominations, they can deliver the vote.

There were some problems with this theory. Exit polls showed that 22 percent of voters named "moral values" as their "most important issue," a fact of which much was made in the days after

the election, on the Left as well as on the Right. But the very same polls on which the moral-values story line was based showed that those who said either "terrorism" or "Iraq," taken together, added up to 34 percent of the electorate. Moral values certainly weren't *un*important, but the 2004 elections were clearly about the War on Terror. It was evident not just from the polls, but also from the campaigns both parties ran, which overwhelmingly focused on who was better suited to protect the homeland and fight terrorism overseas.

Still, social conservatives weren't all that far off. Whether or not so-called values voters had been the deciding factor in 2004, they were certainly of primary importance to Rove's electoral strategy moving forward. One of his central insights was that the Republican Party had to start making inroads with minority voters, and while blacks and Hispanics have long voted Democratic based on economic issues and historical loyalty, they might be persuaded to vote Republican by an aggressive appeal to them on social and cultural issues. There were other components to the Republican Party's minority-outreach strategy, of course, such as not harping on illegal immigration—lest the GOP look hard-hearted or racist—but God and family were the keys.

What's more, one simply can't overestimate the religious fervor of the Republican Party's existing base. There was a sentiment among many at CPAC that George W. Bush had been picked by God to lead America. In fact, this claim was made so many times during the conference, both from the stage and from the audience, that the incidents were almost beyond counting. In one particularly partisan prayer before one of CPAC's formal dinners, God was thanked specifically for the Republican majority in Congress.

When God and government are on the same side, who needs restraint?

Of course, not everyone at CPAC was ready to go along with Rove's emerging God-and-government coalition. While many social conservatives are ready to make common cause with a party that has lost all concern with limiting the size of government—that spends without restraint, that sees no area of American life as

too intimate for Washington's gaze, and that actively looks to expand the state to shore up its political base—other conservatives are not.

Peppered throughout the conference were signs of discontent.

Floyd Brown, executive director of Young America's Foundation and one of the organizers of CPAC, told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that while conservatives were euphoric about the elections, they were still troubled by the growth of government. "Bush is not the leader of the conservative movement," he said. "The conservative movement is going to stick to its roots."[9]

Senator Tom Coburn (R-Okla.), in a talk titled "Simply Talking about Runaway Spending Won't Cut It," blasted the president for his "failed leadership" in not having vetoed a single spending bill in his time in office. He also blasted some of his colleagues as "careerist" lawmakers, more concerned with getting reelected than pushing a bold conservative agenda. Coburn was introduced by former congressman and current MSNBC talk-show host Joe Scarborough, who had just written an election-year book blasting the Republican Party for having gone native in Washington and having abandoned the legacy of Ronald Reagan.

Pat Buchanan, never one for understatement, came out guns blazing. "We do not consider 'Big Government Conservatism' a philosophy," he told the crowd. "We consider it a heresy."[10]

The biggest gap, however, was generational. If the kids at CPAC are the future of the conservative movement, then big changes are on their way—at least when it comes to cultural issues.

Take, for example, two students from the College of New Jersey, Thomas Sales and Eric Pasternack, at CPAC representing their College Republicans group. Sales described himself as "a big fan of God" who finds homosexuality "reprehensible" because of his Christian beliefs. Asked his opinion on gay marriage, however, his response was simple: "From a liberty perspective, I can't find any reason you'd ban it." Pasternack, chiming in, added that most people their age are more in favor of civil unions than opposed to gay marriage. "It won't be an issue in twenty years," Sales added.

And these two were hardly a deviation from the mean. When

Senator Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) spoke on the first day of CPAC, he knew some of the younger people would be skeptical, so he addressed himself to those "economic conservatives who may not be cultural conservatives." He presented an argument that gay marriage would lead to social decay, which would in turn lead to a need for more government. But at least some of the students were unimpressed. Asked about the talk the next day by the *St. Petersburg Times*, twenty-two-year-old Deb McCown identified Santorum as "one of the speakers everybody hated." McCown, editor of the *Carolina Review*, a conservative magazine at the University of North Carolina, continued, saying "he got up there and started talking about marriage as if it was the biggest issue, but it's not. It's taxing and spending." She added that Republicans are not living up to their ideals of "cutting spending and smaller government and personal responsibility."[11]

Perhaps most confounding to CPAC's organizers were the results of the straw poll held at the end of the conference, in which six hundred respondents (two-thirds of them college students) picked the candidates they thought would win the Republican and Democratic presidential nominations in 2008. Hillary Clinton got the Democratic nod, of course. But the Republican nod went not to a traditional conservative, such as Florida's governor Jeb Bush or Senate majority leader Bill Frist, but instead to the fiscally conservative, socially liberal, tough-on-terror Rudy Giuliani.

What those voting probably didn't know was that American Conservative Union chairman David Keene had pointedly rebuffed an offer by Giuliani to address the conservative faithful, sans his usual speaking fee. "I would assume he wanted to come here to boost his conservative credentials, but we didn't think that would be useful," Keene told columnist Deroy Murdock after CPAC.[12]

So just what is it about a Rudy Giuliani that so upsets the old guard of the conservative movement? Is it the potential for a new kind of fusionism—really, a rejuvenation of the old kind—that is committed to small government in economic and personal affairs and that, at the same time, is unflinching in the face of the terrorist threat?

Can the Republican Party and the conservative movement really conceive of no way forward other than to concede the bulk of their long-held convictions to the opposition? Do they have so little faith in the principles of the movement of Goldwater and Reagan?

The history of modern conservatism is the history of a marriage, with all of the attendant ups and downs, spats and make-ups, flirtations and frustrations, and distance traveled together by souls sharing a common purpose.

Or at least something vaguely resembling a common purpose. If you squint really hard.

For as long as there has been a self-aware conservative movement—that is, since roughly 1955, when William F. Buckley Jr. founded *National Review*—a debate has raged as to whether its two main factions, traditionalists and libertarians, truly share the same goals or whether they share only common enemies. Surely, in the decades after World War II, people from both camps, as they wandered in the political wilderness, cursed the name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They also despised the specter of totalitarian communism. And they would instinctively band together to oppose any massive expansion of the federal government, such as Lyndon Baines Johnson's Great Society. But beyond that, it has remained a perennially open question just why these two groups would ever choose to be in a political movement together.

The traditionalists—typified by political philosophers such as Russell Kirk and Richard M. Weaver—placed the highest value (as their label might suggest) on tradition and social order. Repulsed by the rise of mass society and horrified by the depravity of the "total" war waged by and against Nazism and fascism, they radically rejected their own age. Seeking solace in the past, they exalted concepts such as a rigid class structure, elitism, and obedience to authority—especially the authority of God. As Kirk put it, this brand of conservative believed, first and foremost, that a divine intent rules society and that "political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems."[13]

The libertarians, on the other hand—typified by economists such

as Milton Friedman and Murray Rothbard—placed the highest value on human freedom. These men, too, were aghast at the age in which they lived, though for very different reasons than those of the traditionalists. They believed that, if anything, society had grown too authoritarian. In the march toward greater and greater state control of the economy, first during the Great Depression and then during World War II, the libertarians made out what the Austrian economist F. A. Hayek called, in a slim volume published in 1944, "The Road to Serfdom." Control over the economy, Hayek argued, meant control over every aspect of man's being—which could only lead to totalitarianism. The government, libertarians believed, must be kept as small as possible, and individuals must be restricted in their actions as little as possible.

Libertarians considered traditionalists little dictators, aching to subject their fellow man to one particular view of God's will. Traditionalists considered libertarians imitation anarchists, isolating man from society and reducing him to nothing more than the sum of his material desires. Yet somehow by 1964 these two warring factions would ally to take over the Republican Party. By 2004, forty years later, they would dominate the entire country.

On the road to dominance lay a cantankerous Arizona senator, a genial out-of-work actor, and a swaggering pretend cowboy. Yet few conservatives—and even fewer liberals—remember the role played by a chain-smoking, home-schooling, nocturnal ex-Communist named Frank Meyer, who, from his house tucked away in the Catskill Mountains near Woodstock, New York, showed the movement how it could fuse together into something far greater than the sum of its parts.

The world was a lonely place for conservatives only a little more than fifty years ago. But Meyer showed them it didn't have to be. Tradition and liberty were complementary. Freedom and virtue were inextricably linked. And "Godless" communism was a moral affront and a mortal threat to traditionalists and libertarians alike. A limited federal government pursuing a strong national defense would be the ideal scenario for all.

Meyer's fusionism is a tradition and a formula that contemporary

conservatives have largely forgotten or set aside, especially since the end of the Cold War. But as the Republican Party gains in power, and the old alliances shift and crack and twist and fray under the tumult of wielding that power, it's worth remembering just how the alliance at the heart of the party came to be in the first place.

There are many in the Republican Party who believe that now is the time to enjoy the spoils of victory. In truth, however, this is just the beginning of a new war—a war for the heart and soul of conservatism.

On one side are those conservatives who think that the cause of small government is lost. And if they can't beat big government, they might as well run it. They believe that the battles of the past have been a foolish diversion and that now is the time to adapt to the world as it is and to cease imagining the world as it could be. Some of these people have begun to simply seek power for its own sake. Others have sold their souls in the hope of buying them back one day. Still others have glimpsed a golden opportunity to impose their idea of morality on their fellow citizens. The road to victory has been long and arduous, all of these people recall, and so in their minds there can be no turning back to the discarded ideas of the past.

Yet there are other conservatives. They are just now waking up to what their party has become: an echo, not a choice. They are realizing that big-government conservatism is no longer an ill-conceived theory, it is the creed of the Republican Party. And they are realizing that far from being "confident and optimistic and forward-leaning," as Karl Rove would have it, this brand of conservatism is weak-kneed, defeatist, and retrogressive to a time before giants fused together the coalition that in four decades defeated communism abroad, halted the march toward socialism at home, lowered taxes, and reformed welfare—just to name a few of its accomplishments.

This is the story of a movement—an extended family, really—that rose from humble beginnings to heights it could never have imagined. It's the story of idealists tempted and eventually corrupted by power. And it is the story of old friends torn apart by the

pressures and possibilities and pitfalls of success. Most of all, however, it is the story of how these old friends might renew the bonds that have tied them together these many years and recall the ideals and the ideas and the passions that once united them.

The Republican Party stands at a pivotal moment in its history, as was becoming clear to those on the convention floor at CPAC. It can learn to live with big government, determining that it's not so bad, just as long as it's Republicans intruding into the lives of Americans instead of Democrats. Or it can remember its roots and realize that a majority set against its own bedrock principles of limited government and individual liberty is not one worth having—and thus not one that can long be sustained.

The marriage between libertarians and social conservatives would certainly not be the first torn apart by power and fortune and success. But the consequences of such a divorce would be uniquely far-reaching. They would be of concern well beyond the expanses of the conservative family—most acutely, perhaps, to those moderates and liberals already profoundly uncomfortable living under Republican governance, who can only dread what this new, expansionist conservatism might become.

Most aggrieved, however, would be those conservatives who have remained faithful to their small-government vows—those who know the nobility of what conservatism can be when it holds to its ideal of a limited government that leaves Americans to work and prosper and love and pray, free from the daily diktats of the meddlesome minds in the nation's capital.

The differences between libertarians and social conservatives are not yet irreconcilable. There is a way open toward reconciliation—a way that revives the old fusion of liberty and tradition, freedom and responsibility, small government and strong government.

But to find it, conservatives of all stripes will have to begin by acknowledging the elephant in the room.