

Republicans in Wonderland

by Harley Schlanger

It was certainly a grand spectacle. The cavernous Astrodome in Houston was all decked out in red, white, and blue for the Republican National Convention. An enormous speakers' podium which towered above the delegates was itself dwarfed by a faux stone arch and two gigantic television screens which projected images to confirm to those in the back rows that there was indeed a speaker up there.

Bands blared, special "rally squads" screamed, and speaker after speaker delivered paeans to "family values," which seem to have replaced "Mom, hot dogs, and apple pie" as a rallying cry for both parties. And it all ended with a world's record balloon drop, proving again that Republican media consultants can outdo those hired by the Democrats.

While the pundits huddled, debating whether the four-day gathering would give President George Bush the sizable "bounce" in the polls needed to give him a chance of winning in November, many Americans facing economic conditions comparable to those of the Great Depression were left scratching their heads, wondering whether the Republicans were talking about the same United States of America that they themselves inhabit.

Did George Bush 'win' the Cold War?

The delegates arrived facing many uncertainties. Was Bush sick? Would Quayle be dumped? The *New York Times* added to the drama by publishing an article the day before the convention opened which cited a source who claimed that Bush was preparing to bomb Iraq to help win reelection. Though a livid Bush denied it, there was a plausibility to the charge: After all, Bush had said he would do "anything it takes" to win reelection.

As the convention opened, the central theme for the campaign was sounded, that George Bush has spent the last four years securing a victory in the Cold War, a victory which

was forged by a strong defense and his skillful diplomacy. Now, he needs four more years to make the United States into an "economic and export superpower."

This theme was first launched by Secretary of State James Baker III in his farewell address to employees of the State Department a week earlier. Baker told them that, under the current administration, more people have been freed from tyranny than in any other period in world history. This was repeated over and over at the convention, with the refrain that the end of the Cold War has made the world a safer place, freeing America from threat of nuclear war while providing freedom for hundreds of millions of people who previously lived under communism.

But what of the brutal genocide being committed against the people of Bosnia by the Serbians, who were given the green light to conduct their Nazi-like "ethnic cleansing" by James Baker and his Kissinger-crony Lawrence Eagleburger at State? What of the bloody war in the Transcaucasus, or the continued deployment of Russian troops in the Baltic states?

And what of the dangers inherent in continuing the economic "shock therapy" imposed on the economies of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where a cold, hard winter of scarcity caused by free market fanatics such as Harvard's Jeffrey Sachs threatens to trigger a civil war, or perhaps a nuclear confrontation between a starving Russia and its neighbors? Not a word was spoken of these dangers, which would shatter the dreams of a world at peace described by Bush and his supporters.

The 'Reagan Recovery'

Among those who fed these dreams was former President Ronald Reagan, who took the delegates for a nostalgic stroll. Showing that he can still read a speech, Reagan left many delegates misty-eyed as he recited the familiar nostrums of

his free market mantra. He repeated his theme of optimism, that it is still “morning in America” with “the best yet to come.” Calling for less government, spending cuts, tax reduction, etc., Reagan also provided, for those speakers who followed him, an “enemy image”: the Democratic Congress.

In order to succeed in reducing the deficit, the Republicans presented their case that the “gridlock” in Washington must be broken. This can be done only by taking control of the Congress away from the Democrats. (Of course, the Democrats maintain that the easiest way to end congressional “gridlock” is to elect a Democratic President who can work with the Democratic Congress!) If President Bush were to have a free hand with a cooperative Legislative branch, the argument goes, then he could achieve for the domestic economy victories commensurate to those achieved in foreign policy in the first term. The underlying belief of Bush and his supporters is that the “Reagan Recovery,” which they continue to proclaim was the “longest peacetime period of economic expansion in history,” was based on tax cuts, spending cuts, and deregulation. If that combination can be applied again, they argue, then the economy will soar.

What they, and their Democratic opponents, have not yet grasped, is that there never was a Reagan Recovery. Under Reaganomics, the greatest growth in the economy occurred in the size of debt, both public and private. The United States became the world’s largest debtor nation, living off the cheap raw materials, food, and labor of the formerly developing sector. The decline of U.S. industrial capacity, which had begun with the oil hoax under Richard Nixon, gained speed during the Reagan years, while family farms were lost in record numbers.

The apparent prosperity of the mid-1980s, which was held up as model for Bush’s second term, was limited to a small segment of the population, primarily those Yuppie suburbanites whose incomes were derived from speculative ventures. The “winners” of the Reagan years were those who made money in real estate, junk bonds, corporate takeovers, “recreation” and tourism, and “entertainment”—as well as the attorneys who represented them all.

Yuppie economics

It is to this group that the Yuppie Republican governors who addressed the convention were appealing. The message from the pro-gay rights Gov. William Weld (Mass.), from Gov. John Engler (Mich.), Gov. Tommy Thompson (Wisc.), and Gov. Jim Edgar (Ill.) was the same: Cut taxes and services. All are vigorous proponents of “welfare reform,” by which they mean workfare—either work or no benefits. As in Engler’s Michigan program, where more than 80,000 people were thrown off the welfare rolls to compete for low-paying jobs with unemployed auto workers, these programs are nothing but an attack on the prevailing wage scale. The “losers,” i.e., those who are unable to find work, or are unable to feed their families and pay the rent on the low wages they earn, will be left to die on a human scrapheap. How do such

programs promote “family values”?

These governors were also strong proponents of another plank of the Bush platform, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). One week before the convention, Bush announced that an agreement had been reached by negotiators for the United States, Canada, and Mexico, to provide “open markets” for North American goods. An *EIR* study, using data provided by the U.S. government, has demonstrated that NAFTA would lead to the shutdown of many of the remaining industrial jobs in the U.S., as manufacturers would move to Mexico to take advantage of the virtual slave-labor wages paid there.

It is no coincidence that Clinton, the Democratic nominee, is in agreement with his fellow governors on many of these points. Clinton’s Democratic Leadership Council has promoted many of the same programs as the austerity-minded Republicans. The DLC, which claims to be bringing the Democrats back into the “mainstream,” has been accused by many Democrats of selling out the soul of the Democratic Party, especially its commitment to civil rights and labor.

Under the ‘big tent’

Despite the facade of unity, there was grumbling among the ranks of the Republicans, just as there was for the Democrats when they met in New York; when Clinton was far behind in the polls. Many Republicans came to Houston convinced that the election was lost. The Platform fights were often quite bitter, as pro-abortion sentiments were voiced by many, including Governor Weld.

The final version of the Platform, which was firmly pro-life, with repeated references to “family values,” was crafted to encourage the conservative wing of the GOP, which has been unfriendly to Bush, to bring them in for the fall campaign. Many had voted for Pat Buchanan during the primaries, and many had flirted with H. Ross Perot before he left the race. In a further effort to gain their support, Buchanan was given a slot to speak on prime time the first night of the convention.

Still, many of these conservatives remain suspicious of Bush and the “big tent” philosophy, which became more evident as the convention progressed. They were behind the demands for a scapegoat on the economy, with calls growing for the firing of Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady and Budget Director Richard Darman. One group, the Associated Conservatives of Texas, distributed an open letter to Bush, which said that the purpose of the letter was “to let you know that middle America does not trust you anymore.” There were also hints that Bush’s Texas rival, Perot, may be ready to step back into a race he abruptly left four weeks before.

Thus, in spite of the confetti and balloons, the hours of speechifying and partying, and the attempts to reassure the voters that Bush is “fired up” for the campaign, many Republicans left the Astrodome with an uneasy feeling. The visit to Wonderland was not enough to assuage their fears that it is no longer “morning in America.”