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The **New Republic**

MARCH 31, 1997

SPRING BREAKDOWN

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SECTION: Pg. 18

LENGTH: 2208 words

HIGHLIGHT: Conservative youths despair, drink, debauch.

On the fourth floor of Washington's Omni Shoreham Hotel, eight young men sit facing each other on the edge of a pair of beds. They are all 20 or 21 and are enrolled in Midwestern colleges. Each is wearing a white or blue shirt with the top button unfastened, and each has his striped tie loosened. One of the young men, an Ohioan, is wearing a green and white button that reads: "Save the Males." The minibar is open and empty little bottles of booze are scattered on the carpet. On the bed, a Gideon Bible, used earlier in the night to resolve an argument, is open to Exodus. In the bathroom, the tub is filled with ice and the remnants of three cases of Coors Light. The young men pass around a joint, counterclockwise. "I'm telling you, I'm telling you, we don't know what we're doing," says Jason, a brown-haired freckled boy from Iowa, between puffs. "We've got no mission. We've got no direction. Conservatives--we're like a guy who has to pee lost in the desert, searching for a tree." The other seven young men nod and mumble in agreement.

Over the next hour, in a haze of beer and pot, and in between rantings about feminists, gays and political correctness, the young men hatch a plan. Seth, a meaty quarterback from a small college in Indiana, and two others will drive to a local bar. There, the three will choose the ugliest and loneliest woman they can find. "Get us a real heifer, the fatter the better, bad acne would be a bonus," Michael shouts. He is so drunk he doesn't know he is shouting. Seth will lure the victim, whom they call a "whale," back to the hotel room. The five who stay behind will hide under the beds. After Seth undresses the whale, the five will jump out and shout, "We're beaching! Whale spotted!" They will take a photograph of the unfortunate woman.

This is the face of young conservatism in 1997: pissed off and pissed; dejected, depressed, drunk and dumb. The eight young men were visiting Washington, D.C., in early March, as they did last year and the year before that, for the Conservative Political Action Conference (cpac), arguably the most important event of the conservative year. Over the past twenty-four years, cpac, hosted jointly by the American Conservative Union and Human Events, and sponsored by every conservative group from the Christian Coalition to Citizens for a Sound Economy, has become the greatest draw on the right-wing circuit. Last year, more than 1,000 conservatives paid about \$100 just to hear the lectures. Many coughed up another \$200 to attend the banquet and receptions. During the 1996 primaries, every major Republican presidential candidate tried to shore up their conservative credentials by speaking at cpac. As the young men on the fourth floor smoked and swilled and schemed, Jack Kemp was delivering this year's keynote address.

cpac became a rite of passage for young conservatives in the Reagan glory days. Every year, hundreds of college students and recent graduates drove to Washington from around the country. Often sleeping five to a room, they made up nearly half of the participants, and they gave cpac the abundant raw energy that made the event special. They filled the conference room to hear discourses in tax cutting (good) and feminism (bad). They gave standing ovations to Phyllis

Schlafly and Pat Robertson. Every year, they believed victory was close at hand. Patience, they said, was all that was needed.

But, this year, cpac bore no resemblance to a victory party. Turnout was down 50 percent. Not just seats, but entire tables were empty during Newt Gingrich's opening address. Vendors said they sold fewer GOP buttons, stuffed animals, aprons, T-shirts, books and tea-cozies than in years past. His arms windmilling and flailing in the air, Gingrich begged the audience to be more excited. This is "one of the first times that I've ever seen where the winning team feels defeated," he screamed at the glum faces. "And people walk around with long jaws and talk about how concerned they are that the Republicans lost their way." Later in the day, when Alan Keyes, one of the right's most popular speakers, ascended the podium, the room was even emptier. Keyes often paused as if waiting for thunderous applause, but there was only silence. When he looked up, puzzled, a few individual claps could be heard from the back of the room. "For those people who have been conservatives their whole lives and are stumbling about right now asking themselves all kinds of strange questions about conservatism, I simply feel sorry for them," Keyes proclaimed. "We have the moral structure to lead us ahead." Ralph Reed, the Christian Coalition's executive director, spent much of his time at the podium, blaming the GOP funk on "muddle-headed" moderates who don't accept a socially conservative agenda.

Something quite peculiar has happened to conservatives. As they keep telling each other, they should be delighted with the way things are going. In 1996, they passed a test of historic importance in holding Congress. Although weakened, Newt Gingrich remains speaker, and the vacuum left by his political diminution has been at least partly filled by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott. The Democratic president is in the worst trouble of his frequently troubled tenure, and these troubles will, at the least, consume the president's attention and energy for much of 1997. In recent weeks, the trouble has spread to Vice President Gore, the presumptive Democratic nominee in 2000. Conservative ideas so dominate the political agenda that the debate between the White House and Congress largely concerns questions of degree and methodology, not principle. By logic, this should be a season of GOP contentment, or at least relative satisfaction.

Yet the sound of right-wingers bitching and moaning is all over Washington. The money wing of the GOP and the Christian moralist wing are no longer on speaking terms; they snipe at each other from opposing columns on the op-ed page of The Washington Times. The Weekly Standard, which seeks to supplant National Review as conservatism's arbiter, ran a cover story exhorting the faithful to shape up and get tough. But the most telling of all these signs of conservative malaise is that, suddenly, the movement's youth look like a lost generation. The youth turnout at this year's cpac was so dismally low that the event's organizers won't release specific numbers, but veterans of the event estimated it was 75 percent less than in years past. Several College Republicans running for national chairman canceled the small parties (called, in genteel fashion, "hospitalities") that have been used for years to woo supporters. And, at a booth for recent college graduates, stacks of free blue and white "conservative and proud" bumper stickers remain untouched. Meanwhile \$1 "show us the way" stickers, bemoaning the void of leadership, sell out. For youth at cpac, idealism is out. Despair and hedonism are in.

Around 9:30 p.m., Seth, Rick and Jason drive to a popular downtown bar. They park in front of a fire hydrant. Within fifteen minutes they spot their victim. About 5'3" and stout, she is standing near the bar, alone. Her lipstick has rubbed off on her wine glass, leaving only the cherry outline. Jason says this may be the only time he has wished a woman would wear a longer skirt to hide her legs. Seth walks up to her, and they exchange smiles. Forty minutes and two gin and tonics later, he invites her back to his hotel to get stoned. He signals the other two, and they drive back to make sure everyone is hidden under the beds. Twenty minutes after that, Seth arrives with the young woman in a taxi. The two go into Seth's room. From the hallway, they can be heard through the door talking loudly. Half an hour later, the woman begins screaming. The door flies open, and she runs out. Tears, black from the mascara, stream down her face. She is holding her shoes and gripping her crumpled blouse to her chest. Inside the room, Charlie gives Seth a high-five. He promises to get the photo developed and duplicated in the morning. The men start chanting Seth's name over and over. Shirtless Seth bows and then flexes his biceps over his head. He grunts loudly.

This repellent scene was only a little beyond the norm of the conference. A wash of despair and alcohol and brutishness hung over the whole thing. Everywhere I went, it seemed, something sad or sordid was underway, or just finished, or about to begin. Halfway through the Keyes speech, I leave to go to the men's room. Inside, a wiry mustached twentysomething is getting to second base with a svelte blonde. The woman is sitting on the sink counter, her white blouse

unbuttoned and hands above her head, pressed against the mirror. His face is buried between her breasts. I ask them why they ditched Keyes.

"Get out of here. Can't you see we're busy? This is way not cool," the man snaps back.

"Since I've already interrupted you, could you please just quickly answer the question?" I ask politely.

"Get out. Get out. Look, it's just not interesting listening to all them. I was having fun here. Now get out," he yells.

The blushing woman starts buttoning up her shirt to leave. But the man pleads: "Come on, stay. Please stay. You know this is what it's about."

A hotel janitor says he discovered two college students having sex on the dais in the middle of the night. At 4 a.m., in the hotel's empty garage, three students smoke pot. They explain that the sidewalk is too public, and they don't want the professor who came with them to smell it in their rooms.

Kids at cpac have always gotten drunk and laid, but that wasn't always the primary reason they came. This year, it seems, it was. "Yes, of course we're here to have fun," explains 19-year-old Jon Segura, a Vermont student who shakes hands with everyone who walks by the College Republicans' booth. "We like to say that up in Vermont there are more cows than girls... And sometimes you can't tell which one is which. It's not the same here." Several college sophomores standing around the Christian Coalition booth say that they party so hard because partying is all that the event--all that conservatism--really offers them. "Our problem is there is no defined torchbearer," explains Jason Burgen, the treasurer for North Carolina's College Republicans. "Now there is no Reagan, no one to lead us. So, there's a cynicism and a depression that has set in."

On Friday night, forty of the young conservatives ditch Lott's speech and pack a sweaty hotel room on the second floor. On the door someone has taped a sign that reads: "The lost ones--in here." Again, the bathtub is filled with beer, and a thick cloud of marijuana smoke hangs above the crowd. A red-headed guy whose name tag only says "Greg" tries unsuccessfully to program the pay-per-view to show an X-rated movie. Almost everyone in the room says they supported Phil Gramm or Pat Buchanan in last year's election.

"Look around, you'll see we're wandering," says Chuck Reingold, a College Republican from California. "I didn't even sign up for the conference this year. What's there to learn? You see that? That's why I come now." Reingold points to the bed. A short, busty woman is standing on the foot of the bed to kiss a very tall man. One hand is wrapped around his torso, the other is holding a cigarette with an ever-extending and fragile ash. When the two come up for air, the woman tucks her cigarette-free hand into the man's front pocket. She is, it turns out, a 22-year-old Marylander, and a big fan of the Republicans' chief moralizer, Bill Bennett. "He has some good morals to impart, and I really like his book," she says. "Is that an okay answer? I'm not really sure what else to say."

As the night drags on, two people begin snorting what looks like cocaine in the bathroom. Several bottles of vodka are brought in. By 1 a.m., more than half the guests have paired up and are making out. The fog of marijuana and cigarette smoke gives the scene an unfocused, almost slow-motion quality. Two women wearing Buchanan buttons, and swaying to a beat only in their heads, move from man to man along the windows, kissing the men and rubbing their breasts against them. One of the partygoers invites "everyone who wants to get naked" to his hotel room. Five men and four women, all college students, high and drunk, follow him to the elevator.

In the get-naked room, everyone disrobes immediately, without a hint of embarrassment. One couple fondles each other in the corner. A muscular man, apparently hallucinating, prances around the room like a ballet dancer. A woman locks herself in the bathroom, crying and shouting out the name "Samuel." No one knows who Samuel is. The rest lounge on the beds, watching television and eating pretzels. They stare glassily at the screen, and, when they speak, they sound like they are talking through Jell-O. Among the naked bodies on the bed is Cynthia, a Dole supporter who lives less than a mile from the hotel. "What would give you the idea we're having problems? Huh? Why do you think that?" she asks me. "What was I saying? Oh, yeah. This is, like, just how the movement is now. Get used to it."

LOAD-DATE: March 27, 1997

LANGUAGE: English

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