

America's Future Moves Forward

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Every year in Washington, D.C., the Campaign for America's Future (CAF) convenes the largest conference of activists positioned anywhere to the left of wherever the center has drifted off to. Labor and community groups and civil rights groups play a big role, most of them strictly loyal to the Democratic Party. The focus is on domestic issues, and the approach is an inside strategy of nudging and honoring those in power. You can sense my cynicism, and yet this year I was very pleasantly surprised.

In past years the peace movement has protested, agitated, and self-organized, as the CAF has declined to include any panel discussions of war. It's been as if the conference planners had never heard of Iraq or Afghanistan, even while strategizing for elections and lamenting the lack of funds for non-military projects. Also in the past any panels on "accountability" have been extremely weak.

This year there was a panel on Afghanistan with four speakers, every one of them completely opposed to continuing the occupation. There was also a panel on excessive military spending at which three of the four panelists, including Congressman Barney Frank, proposed massive cuts in the military budget. And there was a panel on accountability at which all three speakers, including Congressman Jerrold Nadler, favored prosecuting torture and other crimes by high officials. Nadler stressed the extreme danger involved in not prosecuting such crimes, swore he would not be a rubber stamp for Obama as the Republicans had been for Bush, and declared that he would never be part of the first Congress to authorize preventive detention.

Each of these panels took place with several other panels occurring simultaneously in other rooms, but the plenary sessions that brought everyone together were encouraging as well. At a plenary on the Employee Free Choice Act, Senator Tom Harkin said that if recalcitrant Democratic senators would not accept a reasonable compromise (and he spelled out what that meant) he would force a vote on the original bill and that one way or another it would pass. Larry Cohen of the Communications Workers of America urged everyone to demand of Democratic senators that they choose the side of working people over the Chamber of Commerce. "Which Side Are You On?" he shouted. "Some senators will say this is not the time because of the economy, but you cannot fix the economy without the Employee Free Choice Act: this is exactly the time!"

In a plenary on other economic issues, Robert Kuttner spoke first, with former progressive and current director of the vice president's task force on the middle class Jared Bernstein listening. Kuttner laid out everything wrong with the current trickle-down, give more money to Wall Street but not Main Street approach. And when Bernstein failed to address the criticisms, moderator Katrina Vanden Heuvel asked him again. He still didn't answer, but

Kuttner and Vanden Heuvel had done an excellent job of amicably but directly presenting the case of the American people to a representative of those shipping our money off to the overclass.

Where the conference fell down was on another of its major focuses: healthcare reform. Just like Senator Baucus, the CAF refused to allow a single supporter of single-payer health coverage to take part in any of its plenaries, panels, or press conferences on healthcare. The approach of only asking for the inclusion of a “public option” is supposed to be strategic and smart, and yet the strongest means of winning that compromise would almost certainly be to push for single payer until forced to back off. It is also critical that we never agree to any ban on states enacting their own single-payer systems. But we can’t even raise that issue as long as mentioning single-payer is forbidden.

Until this year, the CAF’s conference was always called “Take Back America.” I never understood who had once had America or how they would take it back. Now the conference is called “America’s Future Now.” Many speakers claimed that “we” had taken America back and that putting Obama in the White House changed everything. Almost all proposals to lobby the government were framed as ways to “help Obama succeed” even if they were proposals to force Obama to do the exact opposite of what he clearly intends. All of this disturbed me, of course, but was what I had expected. Some of the big players, such as MoveOn.org for example, have completely dropped the pretense that they oppose wars (and of course only ever opposed Republican war supporters). But it is this corrupt partisan nature of the conference that makes its steps forward so stunning. Here is a group of people turning out in smaller numbers than in the past, because America has now been “taken back,” and framing everything as a celebration of Obama. Here is a group of people that barely recognized the existence of Iraq in the past and, in fact, has yet to mention it. And yet here was a group of people coming out strongly against war and militarism precisely when their guy is now commander in chief. I think that speaks volumes.

So, three cheers to Robert Greenwald for putting together an excellent panel on Afghanistan and getting it into the program, and to Howard Dean for saying that single payer should have been included, and to Nadler and Frank and all the other participants in the panels that brought new life to a conference named with absurd exaggeration, but a conference that may perhaps have helped move a decent future a little bit closer to now.

David Swanson is the author of the upcoming book “Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union” by Seven Stories Press. You can pre-order it for a discount price at <http://tinyurl.com/daybreakbook>

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