City of Love

November 1, 2000 By Donna Minkowitz

7.31.00 - 8.3.00 Republican Convention

Donna Minkowitz travels to Philadelphia and gets stoned on compassionate conservatism.

Which of the incredibly beautiful experiences of my four days in heaven shall I tell you about first?

Beautifulest was Chaka Khan leading thousands of conservative delegates in an ecstatic dance to "I Feel for You." Even more profoundly appealing was W's gorgeous Latino nephew, George P. Bush, telling Americans that Republicans love them "no matter the color of your skin or the accent of your speech," as nubile young Republicans of both sexes blew soap bubbles and banged noisemakers. George P. soulfully informed us that his uncle was "*fearlessly* inclusive" and uncontrollably in love with "*nuestra gente*." "*Qué viva W! Qué viva Bush!*" he ended militantly. The overwhelmingly white delegates, many of whom have supported anti-immigrant legislation, appeared to tolerate the bilingual speech because it was given by somebody so stunning.

My first feeling of wanting to kiss George W. was when he used a female pronoun as a generic -- in a speech that used gender-inclusive language a heartwarming six times. Could it be that mouth wasn't disgusting? Bush used it to say, "How many of us held our first child and saw a better self reflected in her eyes?"

But this was not the most hashish-like moment at the convention. That came when he talked about meeting a 15-year-old inmate in one of his Texas prisons and imagining the jailed boy asking him, "Do you, a white man in a suit, really care what happens to me?" Part of me wanted to melt, and I knew that someone must have slipped me something, because no Republican presidential candidate has ever used the phrase *white man in a suit*, or suggested that white men in suits might not really care what happens to the black and poor. Tenderness tried to rise inside me. Could it be? Was George W. loving and progressive? Did he have good politics despite his entire record?

Bush said there was a wall within our nation. On one side are "wealth and technology, education and ambition;" on the other are "poverty and prison, addiction and despair." "My fellow Americans," he went on, "we must tear down that wall."

I couldn't take my eyes from him, despite his refusal to support the Ryan White grant applications from his own state's AIDS groups, his eager defense of sodomy laws. The number of children in

Texas without health insurance tried to come forward in my brain and couldn't. The charm and warmth emanating from him made me want to be stupid. As he spoke, rainbow flecks of love covered everything so perfectly that I felt small-hearted and cynical questioning any aspect of it.

Pat Ware, the AIDS speaker, dragged me back to reality kicking and screaming. Curiously, AIDS was one issue where the Republicans didn't hide their monster-selves within a radiant haze. Fortunately for them, hardly anyone in the country noticed. Ware, a violently conservative abstinence-educator with ties to the Family Research Council, opposes contraception and safe-sex education. An African American from Virginia, Ware is best known for her work with Americans for a Sound AIDS Policy, one of the most reactionary groups in the history of the epidemic, which, among other things, opposed the inclusion of people with HIV in the Americans with Disabilities Act. (Bush's veep pick, Dick Cheney, took the same position.) Ware called for the mandatory testing of all pregnant women; she's also spoken out about the "dangers" of mutual masturbation.

In her speech at the convention, she was only a little more guarded. She thanked the Republicans for helping to ensure that not one more American, "especially an innocent newborn baby," has to live with HIV. She thanked "outstanding" right-wing Rep. Tom Coburn (R-OK) for legislation that insists on "*equitable* distribution of federal dollars, HIV care and treatment," a pointed reference to the idea, backed by right-wingers, that gay-male-heavy cities like New York and San Francisco are getting too much federal money. She said that she was "here tonight to give credit where credit is due: the Republican Congress," whom she praised for stressing "the virtues of personal responsibility and self-discipline."

Not AIDS red meat perhaps, but "innocent newborn baby" is the closest this convention got to red meat of any kind and the crowd knew it. The 4,000 delegates could not bother themselves to pay attention to the earlier part of Ware's speech about the millions of AIDS dead -- so many of them were out of their seats networking and chatting while she spoke that it was actually hard to hear her on the convention floor. But "innocent newborn baby" made them take notice. That and "personal responsibility and self-discipline" were the only lines from Ware that made them cheer.

Even David Smith of the normally circumspect Human Rights Campaign, a gay-lobby group denounced by many activists as too conservative, called Ware "a right-wing Nazi." But all the gay Republicans in evidence loved her, and their organization, the Log Cabin Club, identified her as a sign of their party's daring commitment to black needs.

Carl Schmidt, a young, openly gay alternate from the District of Columbia, praised Ware's speech as "right on the mark." Though concern for the health issues of people of color is rarely in evidence from Log Cabineers, Schmidt said, "It was really important that the AIDS speaker be an African-American woman." Did the line about "innocent" newborns really not bother him, I asked. "Well, innocent newborn babies *shouldn't* get AIDS," he said. Doesn't that line mean that adults who get AIDS are guilty? Schmidt waxed philosophical: "Bush has concerns about people taking responsibility. We all should take personal responsibility. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't care for everyone, right?"

Left and right got even more mixed at the Human Rights Campaign's fund-raiser, where the crowd shrieked for openly gay Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-AZ) as if he were Madonna. He is best known for his work trying to gut Social Security and establishing permanent, normal trade relations with China, one of the worst human rights violators on the planet. Among the smug, good-looking crowd, I met Jim Driscoll, the Log Cabins' AIDS policy expert, a 50-ish man with the pleasantly un-chic and nerdy look of a gay male leftist of the early '80s. Driscoll said that the Bush campaign had asked him for advice on who to pick as AIDS speaker, and he had suggested Ware. "I thought it was important that it be an Afro-American [sic] speaker and also a Republican, and only two names came up: Louis Sullivan and Pat Ware." In a series of conversations with Ralph Reed, the Christian Coalition's former executive director and now a top Bush advisor, Driscoll was asked for his advice on building queer support for a right-wing ticket: "What would be accepted by the Republican Party, and be good for the party, and yet also be a plus with gay people and people with AIDS -- what common ground can we find?" Because Louis Sullivan had a reputation as a boring speaker and also serves on the board of Bristol-Myers Squibb, Driscoll decided to recommend Ware.

First he interviewed her "to make sure she'd never said or done anything homophobic," he says. "That would have been an embarrassment to us."

Was he not bothered by her opposition to condoms? "That, I think, is a viable message for the straight Afro-American [sic] community," he said. "It's a good message to put out." Driscoll said Reed told him that having an AIDS speaker would be good campaign strategy because it showed that "George Bush is a uniter and not a divider." Driscoll, who might make anyone feel political vertigo because he's both been a longtime activist within the Republican party and (simultaneously, for a period) a member of ACT UP/Golden Gate, says, "There were problems with [asking] Mary Fisher [the HIV positive AIDS speaker at the two previous Republican conventions] because she had been awfully associated with, you know, the liberal policies."

"They wanted a conservative," Driscoll told me, "and they really did want someone who was HIV positive, but I said, 'I don't think I can come up with anyone.'" Driscoll could not find someone who was openly HIV positive, alive and a conservative Republican. I had asked Kevin Ivers, the Log Cabins' press person, the names of any openly HIV positive people among the 18 openly gay delegates attending the convention. He couldn't come up with any.

I liked Driscoll for his earnest energy, but his politics scared me. On the topic of AIDS in Africa, Driscoll, a real-estate investor said, "We need to keep the African elites alive, the people who run societies. There's no way we'll be able to keep the general population alive."

I've always been in awe of Republicans because they're capable of saying things that chill the blood like that. I've gone to four Republican conventions because Republicans allow themselves to be openly objectionable, unimaginably selfish. Unlike most of us, they don't try to keep their cruelty under wraps. Writing about them comforts me, because the danger is always exactly where I think it is. So I never have to be afraid of being hurt unexpectedly.

Now George W. Bush is changing all that. His cruelty hides in plain sight, for example, in his plan

to “reform” Social Security. Eric Laursen, a journalist who has covered Social Security for many years, says that Bush’s plan will be a horror for the old and sick. “One estimate is that if you’re 30 now and you have to go on disability in 10 years, you would have to take a benefit cut of 54 percent.” The plan allows workers to invest a portion of their contributions in the stock market, which would mean far less money coming into the system overall. Says Laursen, “That’s going to subtract about $60 billion a year from the money that is used to pay disability recipients.” Bush has assured today’s seniors that their benefits won’t be cut; Laursen says that means he’ll have to reduce benefits for future disability recipients and retirees. While investing Social Security monies in the stock market is a chancy thing even in boom times, says Laursen, Bush’s plan depends on the risky idea that the stock market will continue to perform outrageously well. In reality, the prospects for a 30-year-old who gets sick 10 years after her initial investment are extremely dim.

But there were so many compelling entertainments in Philadelphia that it was hard to keep your mind on something like that. The Republicans unveiled a new campaign song celebrating waitresses, sung by the man who sings “Achy, Breaky Heart.” Then a punk band took the podium, a group called the Interpreters, with indecipherable lyrics and hair like Kurt Cobain’s. The groovy feeling continued with the Christian Coalition, who held a very sweet rally where they didn’t mention homosexuals once.

Even the left got into the swing of things. I got to hear the lovely Greek accent of Ariana Huffington, who still managed to look like Catherine Deneuve after three days of the Shadow Convention she organized to “bring right and left together.” Her gray suit was the nicest thing the left has ever seen, but what were her politics like? Does she support national health care? “No, that’s not something I can get behind,” she told me. Why did she invite John McCain to speak at her convention, when he’s made outrageously antigay statements, and cast antigay votes all his life? “We don’t all have to agree with each other here,” she chided me. Then she said brightly, “He didn’t say anything antigay in his speech today.”

Yet lefties of all stripes flocked to the Shadow Convention, even big names like Jesse Jackson. Was it the peace and love vibe W had loosed in the air? Even Philadelphia’s native left sometimes seemed to be taking lessons from the Bush campaign. At the antipoverty march, organized by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, children were asked to lead the demonstration, even though that put them first in line for the hooves of police horses and a dangerous crush of TV cameras. The kids looked terrified. But I’m sure it made a great visual.

The last night of the convention, when George W. appeared, it was hard to enter the hall because so many people wanted in. Young people filled every available cranny. There was a scent of victory in the air, possibility, power; and also (finally) some of that old Republican bloodlust. People fought for better spaces on the floor. The Republicans had handed out enormous phalluses, red balloons like vast Genoa salamis, and everyone was brandishing one. But people really pushed and shoved over the boulder-sized beach balls, wanting to take away the biggest thing on the floor, a symbol of the unreal pleasures they’d been promised every night here. A disturbing rhythm of sex and violence rocked the hall, and I began to think of the brutality at Woodstock II. I grabbed my souvenir phallus and made it out of there as quickly as I could.

Research assistance: Michelle Tan

UNCONVENTIONAL TREATMENT

While hordes of broadcasters whined about the lack of red meat at the GOP's Velveeta

While hordes of broadcasters whined about the lack of red meat at the GOP's Velveeta convention and feigned interest as they interviewed relatives of former presidents, a battle unfolded outside. Thousands of activists had invaded Philadelphia, marching and blocking traffic to protest W's positions on the death penalty, the environment, health care and AIDS -- and they weren't met with "compassionate conservatism." Police pulled out nightsticks and pepper spray, raided protest headquarters and made mass arrests. AIDS activists were deep in the fray, marching for prisoners with HIV on "Criminal Injustice" day, speaking about PWAs on welfare at the antipoverty demo and making up more than 20 of the 420 arrests (police put the number at 391).

A curious response to overwhelmingly peaceful protests. But curiouser still were the Most Wanted-sized bails levied for traffic ticket-sized misdemeanors and fantastical felony charges. Ten-year ACT UP/Philadelphia veteran Kate Sorensen, 38, topped the list with a $1 million bail and 10 felonies, including "risking a public catastrophe." Sorensen, a pink-haired electronic musician and health union staffer, recalls snacking on an apple and talking into her cell phone on the fringes of that Criminal Injustice demo when an undercover officer tapped her on the shoulder and said, "You've done too much, and I have to arrest you." Though other protesters were herded into crowded cells, Sorensen was held in isolation, and she was alone in an interrogation room two days later when she first heard about the felony charges and seven-digit bail. "I almost threw up," Sorensen says now, "and I didn't get to see a lawyer for two days." Though prosecutors built up Sorensen as a lawless anarchist at her arraignment, the judge tossed out all but four of her felony charges, and, calling Sorensen a "good person," lowered her bail to $100,000. Once friends scraped together loans to get her out, Sorensen discovered that another ACT UPer, Paul Davis, had been singled out as a ringleader, too.

The long days in jail were characterized by little water, less food and spotty medical care for the many injured protesters, and for PWAs. Barry Norris, 43, of Louisville, Kentucky, was arrested while volunteering as a legal observer. Norris says the first words out of his mouth were "'I'm HIV positive. Let's not spill any blood.'" He did escape police batons, but during five days in jail he was forbidden to have a friend fetch his meds, a twice-a-day protease combo. Instead, he was taken to an ER to get fresh meds, which his jailers dispensed as they pleased, giving him only five of the eight doses he needed. Two weeks after his release, he received a bill from Albert Einstein Medical Center, the ER, for $1,299.

Police chief John Timoney called his officers "cool" and "calm," but longtime ACT UPer Kate Krauss told *POZ*, "I've never seen this kind of brutality or these preemptive strikes." The chilling effects are unlikely to warm soon. According to Sorensen's lawyer, Lawrence Krasner, the DA appears eager to prosecute her on felony conspiracy charges and has subpoenaed records for cell phones used at the demos. That kind of surveillance, along with legal fees and bail debt, says Sorensen,

means that the most effective ACT UP chapter in the country “will have to spend a lot of energy mopping up.” (To donate: 215.731.1844.)

by Esther Kaplan

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