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Letter From California

A State GOP at War With Itself

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ANAHEIM, Calif.—At the semiannual gathering of the California Republican Party over the weekend, millionaire publisher and presidential contender Steve Forbes wound up his speech calling for a new birth of freedoms—concluding with the ultimate freedom of all, "the freedom to be born."

Audience members pushed their limp piles of romaine lettuce aside and rose in a roaring ovation. In a low-calorie world of the great big mushy moderate middle, this was marbled red meat, and they gobbled it up.

But only half the room, maybe less, was whooping and hollering. The other half? They sat as stiff as patients in an examination room in their chairs in the cavernous hotel ballroom, looking pained and grimacing.

And so it went. The Republican Party of California, the once mighty powerhouse, is reeling from defeat and debt, with a rancor so palpable that a reporter with a notebook has no trouble getting GOP activists on both sides of the social divide to call one another unprintable names.

In the last election cycle here, the party suffered the equivalent of a massive coronary, losing the governor's office as well as the state Senate and Assembly.

Things haven't gotten any better since November. California Republicans have lost a million registered voters, and the party is \$300,000 in debt.

The day the convention opened, the Orange County Register reported that Republican registration in the county, famous as a bastion of the GOP, had fallen below 50 percent.

With Texas Gov. George W. Bush running well in California--the latest Field Poll puts him ahead of Vice President Gore by 48 percent to 46 percent--one might think that a giddy rush of oxygen would begin to flow again into the veins of the battered party.

But no. As Forbes was giving his luncheon stump speech, a coterie of "radical moderates" was staging an ersatz opposition convention at the hotel across the street, where 150 of the GOP members walked over to listen to Rep. Mary Bono (R-Calif.), their princess of moderation.

Members of splinter groups, such as the California Congress of Republicans, were sporting blaring orange stickers on their lapels, announcing, "It's the platform, stupid." What they meant was that these moderate Republicans want the state party to strip from its platform the plank that demands an end to abortion.

Bob Larkin, a Simi Valley insurance salesman and one of the group's leaders, was sporting one of the stickers as he stood in the hallway near a meeting of the California Christian Coalition, where Assembly candidates were boasting of being the "true conservative, biblical candidate."

The chairman of the state party, John McGraw, thanked Coalition members for supporting his election to GOP helmsman and "for standing up for our values."

What values are those? snorted Larkin. "You can set up all the voter registration tables you want," Larkin said. "But as long as we keep talking about abortion and keep showing the voters our ugly side, we are going to keep losing and keep losing until we reach the point of complete irrelevance."

Asked if he was depressed, Shawn Steel, vice chairman of the state GOP, responded: "No, we're happy! We're gonna ride George W. to the White House."

And beyond Bush? "Off the record?" Steel whispered, getting no acknowledgment from the reporter that anything was off the record. "It's pretty grim."

Indeed. Steel, a backslapping lawyer from Los Angeles, is seen among party people as the antimatter to the

relatively stiff and cautious McGraw. For the first time in recent party history, in a system where the vice chairman runs unopposed for chairman, McGraw was challenged by the moderate wing of his party at the last convention, in February. He won, but it was bloody, and emotions are still raw.

"Basically, what we're trying to do is get rid of the morons who have run this party into the ground," said Fred Davis, a longtime GOP activist from Kern County in California's new battleground called the Central Valley, a booming, sprawling, post-agricultural region of new middle-class subdivisions.

"These people [meaning the energized, organized and deeply committed social and religious conservatives who oppose abortion] keep losing and losing and losing, and we have simply got to say, 'Enough is enough,' " Davis said.

He was standing with a cocktail in his hand at the hospitality suite hosted by the California Log Cabin group, the gay wing, if it can be called that, of the GOP--or as its flier announced, "The Republicans Who Know How to Throw a Party."

But down the hall, munching fried wontons at the hospitality suite of the Asian and Pacific Islander American Republican Caucus, was young Michael Pucci from Chico.

He is as unabashedly far-right as Davis is zealously moderate. Pucci disdains the moderates. "I don't get it," he said. "They're like . . . Democrats." Elizabeth Dole? John McCain? He shuddered. "I have nothing in common with them or their people," he said. "At all."

Earlier that day, Pucci spent some time staffing the Buchanan for President table. He said it got a little ugly. GOP members sporting Bush and McCain and Dole buttons came by and, in essence, said, "Good riddance."

David Nahai, a successful Iranian American businessman active in Republican politics in Los Angeles, was one of those who sat during the standing ovation for Forbes. "If the price we have to pay for losing Buchanan is even the loss of the White House, so be it," he said. "It is so important to change the face of the party."

The changing face of the party was in fact a hot topic at the convention. Party strategists and many activists believe that Republicans in California were deeply wounded by the anti-immigrant rhetoric of former governor Pete Wilson, and they're trying their best to undo the damage.

"This party is changing before our very eyes," Steel told the Asian and Pacific Islander caucus.

In California, which has the seventh-largest economy in the world, the reality is that many of the issues voters tell pollsters they care about--education, safety, sprawl, traffic, health care--are more problems for state government than for Washington.

The state Republicans are targeting nine Assembly seats next November, and they promise to mount winnable candidates for each--a battle plan they call California 2000. If they win, they will take back the Assembly.

"I'm not demoralized. Not at all. I'm happy," said Uttam Dhillon, managing director of the California Republican Attorneys Association. "Don't get me wrong. I was depressed. But not now. No, we're still in the game."

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