

Real Republicans

 nysun.com/article/opinion-real-republicans

Peter Berkowitz

USA Today guest columnist Michael Moore thinks that the Republicans in New York City this week are trying to pull a fast one on the American public. The true way of being a Republican is "the radical right way that George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, John Ashcroft and Co. have defined Republicans." Yet the Republican National Convention aims to perpetrate the hoax that Republicans are actually like "most Americans," favoring laws that protect the environment, supporting equal rights for women and gays, preferring peace to war, wanting bans on assault weapons, and, though sometimes personally opposing abortion, believing that the final decision should be left to the woman.

To pull the wool over the eyes of the electorate, the RNC has been featuring in prime time "gay-loving Rudy Giuliani, gun-hating Michael Bloomberg, and abortion-rights advocate Arnold Schwarzenegger."

There is a litmus test, you see, for determining who is a true Republican and Mr. Moore knows exactly what it is.

Real Republicans believe "in creating a worse life" for others, or at least are indifferent when tax cuts for the rich do so. Real Republicans "never back down." Real Republicans "are up before dawn figuring out which minority group shouldn't be allowed to marry today." And real Republicans like war, so they cheer on "a president who has two more countries left on his axis-of-evil regime-change list."

Of course, Mr. Moore is a preacher of hatred whose scurrilous words might, in another time, have been confined to the lunatic fringe. But today his underlying accusation, that in reality the Republicans are hateful extremists who are attempting to disguise their hateful extremism just long enough to win an election and maintain their hold on power, is shared by a wide swath of the cultural and intellectual elite.

For starters, the accusation betrays a misunderstanding of the condition of the conservative party in America today. To be sure, traditionalist or social conservatives constitute a major part of the Republican Party base, exert a decisive influence in the House and Senate, and have been carefully tended by Mr. Bush. Nevertheless, the Republican Party cannot be a winning party without its more liberal libertarian and neoconservative wings. Diversity of views among Republicans is not a carefully constructed and temporary illusion but the party's present and future reality.

To take the most contentious social issue of the moment, many traditionalist or social conservatives - often men and women of faith - do believe strongly in the need to protect the family by enacting a constitutional amendment to restrict marriage to one man and one woman. Yet many libertarians, for whom limiting the role of the state is a priority, believe just as strongly that the federal government has no business determining who may and who may not marry. Among neoconservatives, who combine respect for religion and tradition with skepticism about the capacity of government to fix social and economic problems, there are differences of opinion: many oppose a constitutional amendment, while some have come out in favor of same sex-marriage and others have argued that question should be left to the states.

At the same time, each camp within the conservative party has its special gripes with the president. The traditionalists and social conservatives not only think he has done too little to protect the family but also fault him for overestimating America's capacity to democratize the Middle East. The libertarians deplore his failure to contain and cut government spending and think his restrictions on embryonic stem cell research benighted. Neoconservatives criticize him for sending too few troops to reconstruct, stabilize, and democratize Iraq.

So how does a political party deal with persistent disagreement on important issues when the party's national convention demands unity? The compromise settled upon by the Republicans was a party platform that gives expression to the views of its more conservative wing, particularly on social issues, while featuring in primetime speaking slots its more liberal stars in order to woo moderate voters.

From Mr. Moore's perspective, however, this is tantamount to rolling out on the convention stage at Madison Square Garden a great Trojan horse from which, should Mr. Bush prove victorious, right-wing troglodytes will leap out on November 3.

Yet why shouldn't members set aside differences for the greater good of the party? Of course, there is a difference between adopting a united front on behalf of a cause that the party genuinely wishes to rally around and professing unity in the name of cause that the party secretly loathes. For example, it would be one thing for, say, a largely anti-war party to present itself to the electorate through its national convention as hawkish and tough on national security. It's quite another for a party that believes that the nation is fighting a many-front global war to agree to disagree about other policies so as to display its determination to prosecute the war to a successful conclusion.

Moreover, it is bizarre to suggest that an enormously popular Republican senator and respected national figure who sought his party's nomination four years ago and is already being spoken of as a leading candidate for his party's nomination in 2008, a former Republican mayor of the nation's largest city who emerged as an American hero after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the Republican governor of the nation's most populous state are, as Mr. Moore sarcastically suggests, RINOs, or Republicans In Name Only.

Indeed, the unity of this year's Republican party is real and the stirring speeches of Senator McCain, Mr. Giuliani, and Governor Schwarzenegger, whom the likes of Mr. Moore have the temerity to dismiss as sellouts and dupes, explain why. Not a word they uttered rang hollow or untrue.

They openly acknowledged differences with their party and respect for ideas better represented by the other party. Yet all concentrated on a common theme: America is at war, the enemy is exceedingly vicious, the ideal that we defend is human liberty, and to protect it at home we must find ways to promote it abroad.

Meanwhile Mr. Moore persists in his relentless bad faith. On Monday evening, Mr. McCain diplomatically but accurately described Mr. Moore as "a disingenuous filmmaker who would have us believe that Saddam's Iraq was an oasis of peace when in fact it was a place of indescribable cruelty, torture chambers, mass graves, and prisons that destroyed the lives of the small children held inside their walls."

On Wednesday, posing as a tender-hearted humanitarian in his USA Today column, Mr. Moore denied that he misrepresented Iraq, and instead mocked Senator McCain as "a courageous war hero reduced to carrying water for the Bush campaign" and attacked Mr. Bush by insisting that "human-rights groups say thousands of civilians were killed because of our bombing."

Why is it, though, that Mr. Moore has no time, certainly in his film, for pausing to consider that those same human-rights groups whose findings he purports to take seriously report that Saddam's diversion of oil-for-food money to palaces, troops, and weapons programs led to the deaths of tens of thousands of children every year, and that in the course of maintaining his brutal tyranny Saddam had over the decades slaughtered hundreds of thousands of his own people?

The puzzle is not why the Republicans in New York City should proudly feature some of their more moderate voices under the bright lights, but rather why Democrats in Boston were not mortified by the spectacle of Mr. Moore, preacher of hatred, sitting as an honored guest alongside Jimmy Carter in the presidential box.