



Jan. 30-Feb. 5, 2004

## Party Crasher

*Dan Borchers wishes Republicans would do the right thing.*

by Brian Montopoli

It's Thursday morning, around 10, and the lobby of the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington is swarming with ambitious teenagers. Most of them are in suits, with a few exceptions: the boy in the red "Viva la Revolution" T-shirt with the picture of Ronald Reagan, the girl in the tight "I (heart) G.W.B." baby T. On the second floor, up the escalator, staffers from the Family Research Council and the Traditional Values Coalition are setting up booths. Secret Service agents walk through the crowd, securing the area for the arrival of Vice President Dick Cheney. A guy selling "I Hate the French" vanilla ice cream stacks his quart cartons into a triangle.

Dan Borchers should be right at home here. Borchers, 49, is a secretary at a labor-management organization who, in his spare time, runs a trio of conservative news and commentary Web sites from his Odenton, Md., home. This is his sixth straight year coming to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), possibly the largest gathering of right-wing activists to take place anywhere in the country. A soft-spoken military veteran, Borchers likes to wax nostalgic about the greatness of Ronald Reagan and the virtues of godly women. He endorsed John Ashcroft when Ashcroft was nominated to be attorney general, believes in the "ex-gay" movement, and wears a gold pin shaped like two small fetal feet on his lapel to signal his opposition to abortion.

Borchers has come, he says, to interview the cavalcade of prominent politicians and activists who gravitate to the conference for the opportunity to commune with the true believers. The interviews, he says, will provide fodder for his Web sites and for a book he is working on, *Conservatism and the Enemy Within*.

But when Borchers tried to register for a press pass for this year's conference, organizers turned him down. It didn't, he admits, come as a complete shock: In 2002, Borchers was escorted to his car after CPAC officials objected to his distributing his newsletter at the conference. Last year, officials wouldn't even let him in.

The reason he's not welcome, Borchers says, is that he doesn't like conflict. Specifically, he believes that conservatism has been hijacked by extremists intent on polarizing the country. And he sees himself as a crusader to get the movement back on track. The worst of the polarizers, in his mind, is Ann Coulter, the TV pundit and author, who is being honored at a CPAC luncheon as woman of the year. Borchers is so incensed by Coulter that one of his Web sites, Coulterwatch.com, is dedicated to refuting her rhetoric. On the site, he complains that "bin Coulter," as he calls her, has declared a "fatwa" against the left.

Borchers may believe that his principles are worth getting thrown out for, but they're apparently not worth staying away for. So he's in the Marriott's lobby again this year, a boxy, ancient tape recorder in his bag, a conference schedule, with prospective interviewees noted on it, in his pocket. The CPAC staffers pay little attention as he makes his way through the lobby and up the escalator. He walks past the registration area, past a row of booths, and straight to the press table, where he identifies himself as a journalist and asks for press credentials. After a brief discussion, the young woman behind the table gives him a badge.

With the badge hanging around his neck, Borchers enters the main exhibit hall, where, interspersed among the booths from conservative news organizations and advocacy groups, vendors hawk books about "the tragedy and threat of the homosexual lifestyle," bumper stickers that read, "GUN CONTROL Means Hitting Your Target," and information on the "eco-myth" of global warming. He stops by a few booths, asking questions and making contacts, before entering the nearly empty pressroom, which features a couple of couches, a table full of sodas, and a television tuned to Fox News.

On the way out, he bumps into Ian Walters, CPAC communications director and the man who barred Borchers last year. Walters is a confident 26-year-old wearing sunglasses on his forehead, highlights in his jet-black hair, and a yellow shirt under his suit. He does not look pleased at the reunion. "I don't recall seeing you on my preregistration list," he says dryly, motioning toward a CPAC staffer standing nearby. He looks squarely at Borchers. "Let's take a walk."

Walters, Borchers, and the staffer work their way through a crowded hallway to outside the conference area. Borchers, expecting a confrontation, turns on his tape recorder. "So what are you doing here?" says Walters. "I'm here as a member of the press covering the conference," Borchers replies. Walters says, "Show me your press credentials. That I didn't give you." Borchers says his work is his credential. Walters shrugs and shakes his head in frustration. "I want to see a real press credential," he says. "You want me to go to the Secret Service and say, 'I'm not quite sure who this guy is, but he seems to think he's a reporter'?" Borchers reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a printout of a CPAC e-mail that says Walters "will be in touch with you about press credentials" proof, says Borchers, that he deserves to be inside. His hand is shaking as he hands it to Walters, who looks it over. No luck. They argue a little longer, and then the phone on Walters' belt rings. He turns away to take the call, then turns back. "I'm done," he says, shaking his head. He looks at the staffer and points at Borchers: "Keep an eye on this guy."

"Dan's not a member of the press," Walters says later. "He posts things on his Web site. A 9-year-old can do that in this day and age." He says Borchers would have been welcome had he registered for the conference as a participant, which costs from \$90 to \$475. He also dismisses Borchers' claim that he was excluded because of his politics. "We let David Corn from [liberal magazine] the Nation in here," he says. "My rule is just that I work with real reporters."

Borchers doesn't see how he's not a real reporter. In addition to his Web work, he argues, he's "conducted hundreds of interviews, attended scores of conferences, been published in a dozen newspapers and magazines, and been interviewed on a dozen radio shows."

Walters and the staffer escort Borchers down the escalator and back into the lobby. Borchers sits down at a table and watches the registrants stream up to the conference. "That's the problem with dealing with some of these people," he says. "It's either their perspective or no perspective. I'm considered a quote-unquote nonentity because I don't have the proper credentials."

He says that coming to CPAC has changed his political perspective. "I'm coming to see that there are more gray areas," he says, leaning back. "Everything's not black and white. Up until a few years ago, I had a more naive or more idealistic view of the conservative movement. Now I think I can empathize with people who are on the outside looking in."

He's not ready to give up, though. Most of the people Borchers wants to interview are already at the conference, so, after an hour, he goes back up the escalator and heads for one of the tables at the fringe of the festivities. A CPAC staffer intercepts him. "I've been instructed to escort you out," says the staffer. Borchers asks the staffer his name. "If you come back up here, I'm going to have a police officer escort you off the property," he replies. Borchers keeps his tape recorder running the whole time, just in case.

He spends the afternoon sitting alone in the lobby, taking notes and keeping his eyes open for potential interviewees. He runs into a political-science professor he knows from Roger Williams University and asks if she has had any luck getting him a speaking engagement on campus. The professor says no. "I'm willing to come up there for free at this point, just as long as you pay my expenses," he says. Later, he spots Bob Barr, the former Georgia congressman, heading through the lobby. He runs over to him, calling, "Mr. Barr, Mr. Barr," and asks for an interview. Barr is on his way to Starbucks. "Call Jennifer at my office," Barr says, scribbling down a phone number. "She'll be happy to set something up." He walks away quickly.

On Friday, in the lobby, Borchers gets his interview with Barr. He also chats briefly with Wayne LaPierre, head of the National Rifle Association, and engages in an impromptu debate with a group of College Republicans. He isn't able to speak with most of the people he hoped to, however, and he doesn't stay at the hotel long. Before he leaves, he spots a law student holding a talking Ann Coulter doll, which she's bought for \$20 at one of the booths upstairs. On the box, Coulter is billed as one of "America's Real Action

Heroes." When you press a button on her back, the doll goes into one of 14 rants, including one about how "liberals hate America." Borchers asks the student why she bought it. Coulter once spoke at her school, the student says, and was a huge hit.

Borchers decides he's seen enough for this year. He vows to come back next January, but he says he'd rather spend this Saturday with his wife than standing around the hotel lobby, hoping someone might wander past. Even if he were to see Coulter, he says, he wouldn't try to interview her. "She'd just ignore me," he says. "Why bother?" CP

## **Letter to the Editor** (“Press Passed,” 2/6)

A point of clarification (“Party Crasher,” 1/30): The Conservative Political Action Conference’s official rationale for excluding me from its conference – that it does not recognize me as a “real reporter” – is bogus. For four years, the organization validated my credentials, even authorizing distribution of my newsletter at CPAC. It was only after my open rebuke of the extremist elements represented at CPAC that the organizers chose to ban me from subsequent conferences.

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