

CPAC, America First conferences: A snapshot of the fascist transformation of the Republican Party

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Two conferences held over the weekend in Orlando, Florida—the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and the America First Political Action Conference (AFPAC)—demonstrated the fascist transformation of the Republican Party under Donald Trump.

This year's annual CPAC event, from Thursday through Sunday, was held against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine following a massive US-NATO military buildup on Russia's borders, threatening a global nuclear conflagration.

The war crisis, the most dangerous since the end of World War II, is driven above all by an intensified social, economic and political crisis of capitalist governments all over the world under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nowhere is this crisis more acute than in the United States, the epicenter of the pandemic.

Coming less than 14 months after then President Donald Trump attempted to overthrow the results of the 2020 presidential election by means of a violent, fascist assault on the US Capitol, the CPAC event showed that would-be Führer Trump retains his grip on the Republican Party, through which powerful sections of the ruling class continue to plot the establishment of a dictatorship to crush the mounting opposition of the working class.

The several thousand mainly middle-class party activists in attendance cheered speeches by current and former Republican officials, far-right podcasters and others denouncing the Biden administration and the Democratic Party as the spearhead of a Marxist, socialist, communist assault on the American nation.

This is allegedly embodied in partial and inadequate mitigation measures imposed to contain the spread of the deadly virus, which Biden and the Democrats are, in fact, in the process of lifting, despite the continuing loss of some 2,000 lives a day in the US and no end to the virus' spread.

The official theme of the conference was “Awake but not woke,” signaling its focus on the supposedly “left” character of Democratic Party identity politics. Its meaning, however, was shown in speech after speech that combined anti-communist hysteria and thinly disguised appeals to racism and anti-Semitism.

Featured speakers included Republican lawmakers such as Reps. Jim Jordan of Ohio, Matt Gaetz of Florida and Madison Cawthorn of North Carolina (an admitted Hitler admirer), who played leading roles in the plot that culminated in the January 6, 2021, storming of the Capitol and who now defend the attempted coup as “legitimate political discourse,” in the words of the Republican National Committee. Counterparts in the Senate who addressed the conference included Ted Cruz of Texas and Josh Hawley of Missouri.

Deepening tensions and fissures in the party were reflected in the absence of Trump's vice president, Mike Pence, and his UN ambassador, Nikki Haley, both of whom are considered possible challengers for the presidential nomination in 2024.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who is considered Trump's most serious potential challenger for the 2024 nomination, gave the opening speech. DeSantis has been touring the country, speaking at exclusive fundraisers where he centers his pitch to wealthy corporate donors on his record of resolutely opposing any and all lockdowns, forcing schools to remain open and blocking all mandates on masks and other restrictions that could impinge on corporate profits. He has reportedly raised \$122 million, ostensibly for his gubernatorial reelection campaign in November, but also for a potential run for president in 2024.

DeSantis' appeal is no less fascist than Trump's. Welcoming CPAC to “the free state of Florida,” he boasted of preventing his state from descending into “some type of Faucian dystopia” and rejecting “the bio-medical security state.” He declared, “We kept our schools open five days a week. We stood strong.” He did not mention that his state has one of the highest COVID-19 infection rates in the country.

He denounced Biden for “dumping illegal aliens into Florida” and pledged to “reroute” them to Delaware (Biden's home state) as well as Washington D.C. and Hollywood.

He attacked anti-police-brutality protesters and touted his “anti-riot” bills targeting left-wing demonstrators and imposing harsh sentences.

Promising to ban critical race theory, he said, “The woke is the new religion of the left... Wokeism is a form of cultural Marxism,” falsely identifying racialist politics with socialism.

Denouncing “big tech,” he declared that he would block the entry of “Zuckerbucks” into Florida, (an apparent reference to Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, but a dog whistle to anti-Semites). DeSantis has refused to condemn an attack on a Jewish student at the University of Central Florida last month by members of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine has sharpened fissures within the Republican Party, with a section of its fascist wing, represented by figures such as Tucker Carlson and Stephen Bannon, refusing to support the US-NATO campaign against Russia, largely on the basis that it is a distraction from the preparation for war against China and the war against immigrants on America's southern border.

Significantly, DeSantis made no mention of the war in Ukraine. He also said virtually nothing about the “stolen election” of 2020 and never uttered Trump's name.

Matt Gaetz, who began his speech by saying, “This is Donald Trump’s party and I’m a Donald Trump Republican,” went on to declare, “Why should Americans have to pay the cost of freedom elsewhere when our own leaders won’t do it here? I’m not for sending Americans to Ukraine.” Like many other speakers, he accused Biden of ceding American sovereignty at the US/Mexico border.

Trump gave the keynote speech on Saturday night. It was a typically rambling, 90-minute string of vile lies and incitements to violence against the left and Trump’s political opponents. He began by making clear his intention to run for president in 2024, telling his ecstatic audience that the Republicans would win back Congress in this November’s mid-term elections and capture the White House in 2024. “We did it twice and we’ll do it again, a third time,” he declared.

He spent a great deal of time reiterating his empty claims of a stolen election and demanding further restrictions on the right to vote. He called for a ban on critical race theory in the schools, falsely linking it to left-wing and socialist thought, the lifting of all COVID restrictions, the completion of his border wall to stop “the invasion of our country” by “millions of illegal aliens rushing our borders,” the breakup of “big tech” and forcing China to pay “trillions of dollars for unleashing the virus on the world.”

He hailed the fascistic “truckers’ convoy” in Canada as a model to be followed in the US, and attacked the Supreme Court for caving in to the “left.”

He defended the imprisoned January 6 insurrectionists as “non-violent protesters” and denounced the Biden administration for holding them without bail.

Most ominous were his invocations of violent repression against his political opponents. He called the House Select Committee on January 6 a “committee of thugs,” denounced Hillary Clinton as a traitor for supposedly spying on his election campaign and declared, “We are coming to break their grip on power forever.”

He alluded to his dictatorial aims when he said, “Our country is being poisoned from within,” and added, “Our most dangerous people are the people from within.”

Trump made a point of denouncing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, calling it “an atrocity that never should have occurred.” He then attributed it to Biden’s weakness on the international stage, zeroing in on the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan and fall of the puppet government in Kabul to the Taliban.

Toward the end of his speech, Trump invoked slogans of the neo-Nazi identitarian movement and repeated what he said on January 6, 2021 to incite his supporters to storm the Capitol: “The radical left is trying to extinguish our very identity as Americans. We have got to fight like hell. We can’t let them destroy our country.”

Following Trump’s speech, the CPAC organizers held a straw poll showing that 59 percent of respondents favored Trump as the GOP’s 2024 presidential candidate, an increase of 4 percent from last year. DeSantis came in second at 28 percent, an increase of 7 percent from last year.

Concurrent with the CPAC event, the openly white supremacist and anti-Semitic America First Political Action Conference was held at a nearby venue in Orlando. The organizer, Nick Fuentes, advocates the establishment of a white Christian theocratic state in the US.

Three current Republican office-holders addressed the conference: Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, a QAnon conspiracy advocate; Rep. Paul Gosar of Arizona, one of the organizers of the “Stop the Steal” protests that led up to the coup attempt; and Wendy

Rogers, a Republican member of the Arizona Senate and self-proclaimed member of the Oath Keepers militia.

The flyer for the meeting listed among the speakers Gavin McInnes, founder of the Proud Boys militia, and Baked Alaska, a.k.a. Tim Ginoet, who livestreamed from inside the Capitol on January 6.

In her speech, Greene called on her audience to “stop the Democrats, who are the Communist Party of the United States of America.”

Wendy Rogers told the crowd that “we need to build more gallows... to make an example of those traitors who betrayed our country.”

Greene went from the AFPAC on Friday to the CPAC conference on Saturday, where she made a speech and was among those Republicans given a shout-out by Trump.

She was not the only fascist who moved between the two conferences. *Rolling Stone* reported that a number of members of Fuentes’ “Groyper Army” attended the CPAC conference as well as the AFPAC event.

The response of the Democratic Party and the Democratic-aligned media has been to downplay the fascistic transformation of the Republican Party as underscored by this weekend’s conferences, and instead attack Trump and company for failing to support the US-NATO campaign against Russia over Ukraine with sufficient enthusiasm.

This is in line with the Biden administration’s attempt, with the full-throated support of the bulk of the corporate media, to fashion an artificial internal “unity” and alliance with sections of the Republican Party on the basis of anti-Russia hysteria and hypocritical support for the “sovereignty” of Washington’s far-right puppet government in Kiev.

On Friday, the *New York Times* posted an article headlined “From ‘City Upon a Hill’ to ‘Anti-Anti-Putin.’” The article lauded the legacy of Ronald Reagan and John McCain, who supported “aggressive US intervention overseas,” and bemoaned its supposed abandonment by the Trump-era GOP. The authors wrote that CPAC’s “evolution from its intellectual roots to ardent populism continues to anger and sadden many on the right.”

On Sunday, former Bill Clinton adviser George Stephanopoulos featured Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton as a guest on his ABC News interview program. Stephanopoulos did not mention Cotton’s call for a military takeover of the US to crush protests against the police murder of George Floyd in June 2020, days after Trump threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act for that purpose. Instead, he attacked Cotton for refusing to denounce Trump for having called Putin “smart” after the Russian leader invaded Ukraine.



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