

# THE Inner Loop



SIMON VAN ZUYLEN-WOOD

## AMONG THE PACK AT CPAC

Covering the  
reporters  
covering the  
conference

**T**HIS IS MY FIRST TIME,” said Jeb Lund, not paying attention to a speech by John Bolton, as we sat in a massive hotel ballroom on the second morning of this year’s Conservative Political Action Conference. Lund—on assignment for *The Guardian*, though he is perhaps best known as a former Gawker writer whose pseudonym was “Mobutu Sese Seko”—had previously mocked CPAC “on Twitter when it was on TV,” he told me. “But I think this is the first year someone had the misguided sense that I should be given a plane ticket.”

PETER HORVATH

Lund, 37, wearing a white long-sleeved T-shirt beneath a charcoal suit jacket, was approaching his task with admirable good cheer. “Yesterday, I did the ‘We’re all going to die’ beat,” he said. “I went to watch people watch Newt and Callista’s video, *America at Risk*.” Then he observed a panel called “When Should America Go to War?” “And the answer was, like, ‘All the time, constantly.’” Today, he would be mapping out “the super fringe of the culture wars” before attempting to sneak into the Breitbart party on Capitol Hill.

I too had previously attempted this kind of anthropological journalism at CPAC, but this year, I went to cover the reporters—of whom there was no shortage (and plenty of whom I knew): The conference has become a bona fide media ritual; of the 11,334 people who attended this year, 1,905 were journalists.

CPAC is covered differently by publications of the Left and the Right, of course, but you don’t have to be a close reader to notice that liberal publications all report on it identically: by seeking out the exotic species populating the conservative zoo. This year, *The Daily Beast* published “Hanging With a Has-Been at CPAC.” (The has-been was Sharron Angle.) “Gary Johnson At CPAC: ‘\\_(‘\`)/\_’” was a headline on *The Huffington Post*. From *Mother Jones*: “Sean Hannity Said Something Really Creepy at CPAC Today.” *The Nation*: “Why the Disturbingly Sane Voices at CPAC Should Scare You.”

The headlines out of CPAC didn’t always look this way. In 1974, *The New York Times* distilled its coverage of the inaugural event, held at the Mayflower Hotel, into a column and a half, and hid it on page 44. A Nexis database search for the words “Conservative Political Action Conference” from 1974 to 1997 yielded just 683 total results.

Search 1997 to 2015, however, and Nexis jams up trying to process the more than 3,000 items. In fact, 1997 is a good inflection point not only because conservative TV and early Internet journalism were about to change the media landscape, but because that was the year fabulist Stephen Glass wrote his sex-at-CPAC story for *The New Republic*. Glass’s story seems only to have encouraged journalists to try to rewrite his piece, but with actual facts instead of invented ones. “It’s a wonder why, after the 1997 CPAC, a reporter named Stephen Glass felt the need to fabricate stories about the

party scene here,” Chris Moody wrote in a 2014 Yahoo News article titled, “CPAC After Dark.” “At CPAC, there’s no need to make stuff up.... Right-wingers can rage.”

Still, from most reporters I spoke to, I detected more than a little self-consciousness about covering CPAC. “There’s always the ‘This is what I found when I went to the young conservatives’ party,” said one *Politico* writer. And yet, he lamented, it isn’t much more original to cynically com-

ment on how CPAC “is a constructed thing.” Whatever we end up writing, he concluded, “it’s just hopeless.”

*Washington Post* media reporter Erik Wemple also confessed to a little CPAC queasiness. “I think it’s one of those situations where it certainly has threatened to become more of us talking to ourselves than actually, you know, taking the temperature of any given strain of the population,” he told me. CBS senior political editor Steve Chaggaris, who joined us a moment later, was less equivocal. “There’s value to this event as an event,” he said. “But what it means in the grand scheme of things? Is anybody’s candidacy going to be made at CPAC? No.”

Some of the hand-wringing was more existential. “I’ve had a version of this thought at every sporting event I’ve covered: All of you fucking people are here basically doing the same thing,” one reporter told me. “There’s some of that around here, too. God, I’m sitting there, tweeting—like a dumbass—the interesting shit somebody said, along with everybody else, roughly at the same time.”

Asawin Suebsaeng, a *Daily Beast* staffer who writes about the intersection of politics and pop culture, didn’t seem entirely sure why he was there, either. “I am here to cover a very narrow beat,” he told me. “So, for example, [*Duck Dynasty* patriarch] Phil Robertson is receiving the Free Speech Award. But to be honest, I’ll probably write nothing, because that doesn’t sound that interesting. Like, I don’t know what he could say that would be Phil Robertson-y

enough to warrant writing about Phil Robertson.” (Suebsaeng ended up writing about Phil Robertson.)

“I’m interested in all these different people here, perched by an outlet,” Chuck Johnson, the conservative blogger known for his suspect brand of guerrilla reporting, told me, pointing to a handful of journalists sitting on the floor, hunched over laptops. “They all want to beat each other to the punch, and they’re all saying the exact

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same thing about the guy they’re watching. If you’re a journalist, you have an incentive to find some crazy stuff that’s going on.” (Johnson did heap some love on at least one fellow scribe, checking out my clothes—shirt, tie—and telling me, “No homo, but I like your decor.”)

There are certainly still defenders of the genre. “There’s this kind of hipster, anti-CPAC thing going around,” Moody told me. “But they’re here. I really don’t get it. ‘I’m so over it, I came all the way to National Harbor to see it.’” *Bloomberg Politics* reporter Dave Weigel, now covering his ninth CPAC, echoed the point: “What is seen as a legitimate journalistic experience? Driving three hours to Cedar Bluff, Iowa? Because there are ‘real people’ there? Because you put in the effort to get there?”

By 8 p.m. on Friday, official CPAC business had ended for the day, but Jeb Lund was still chained to his laptop, his face ashen. “In 90 minutes, I have managed 482 words and I’m not sure they actually contain a contiguous thought process,” he said. He had also abandoned his plan to crash the Breitbart party. “There are only so many times you can highlight the moral crap factory that is a bunch of white neo-confederates listening to ‘Turn Down for What,’” he said.

In a few minutes, Lund would appear on MSNBC to discuss, among other things, a Jeb Bush speech he had missed because he was in a pro-marriage seminar with me. “How’d it go today?” asked the producer manning the makeshift set at the back of the ballroom. “Today sucked,” Lund told him. And then he went on TV.