

### Rallying the left

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By Jules Witcover

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WASHINGTON - Liberal America in exile stirred up a verbal storm against both President Bush and Democratic centrists here last week in a three-day conference to "take back America," as the sponsoring progressive group, Campaign for America's Future, put it.

Seven of the nine declared candidates for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination addressed the estimated 1,500 attendees in what may have been the largest and most boisterous gathering of the party's left wing in three decades or more.

Over the three days, more than 120 speakers and panelists drawn from Congress, organized labor, academia and a host of traditional and Internet grass-roots organizations made forceful arguments for confronting the Bush administration head-on.

In the process, they explicitly or implicitly also took on the party's major centrist organization, the Democratic Leadership Council, elaborating on criticism that the centrists offer the voters "Bush Lite" instead of a clear-cut contrast with the Republican Party.

Several of the presidential aspirants, notably including former Gov. Howard Dean of Vermont and Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, trotted out the standard liberal line that the last thing the country needs is two Republican parties. The way to get elected in 2004, Mr. Dean said, "is not to be like the Republicans. The way to win is to stand up to them and fight."

The tone of many of the speeches and panel discussions struck the same notion, especially in attacking what conference co-organizer Robert Borosage called "the radical and rightist agenda of the Bush administration." He challenged the attendees to emulate the example of 1970s conservatives who created think tanks and political action committees and took political control of the country.

One of a number of new recruits to the progressive movement, Wes Boyd, a young Internet innovator, told how his creation, MoveOn.org, raised more than \$4 million for its causes and generated 440,000 hits to its Internet site opposing the war in Iraq.

At the same time, the conference had the look and feel of the passionate protests of the 1960s against the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon. It was fired not only by opposition to the Iraq invasion but also by an open and fierce anger and hostility toward Mr. Bush, which is not reflected in the public opinion polls.

Although one Democratic member of Congress, Rep. Jan **Schakowsky** of Illinois, ignited the crowd with perhaps the most fiery speech of the conference, the party's congressional leadership came in for its share of criticism for not standing up the Republican president.

The fervor exhibited over the three days clearly was a tonic for the party's progressives, and many participants said the speeches - especially the unvarnished assaults on Mr. Bush - sent them home feeling that he might not be as invulnerable for re-election as the polls suggest. Prominent Democratic pollster Stan Greenberg offered findings to that effect.

One veteran of the progressive political wars, Mark Raskin, co-founder of the Institute for Policy Studies, said he believed the conference could supply the spark for a resurgence of liberal activism last seen on a broad scale in the 1968 campaigns of Sens. Eugene J. McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy.

If it is channeled into the fight for the Democratic nomination, Mr. Dean, who got a rousing reception, could be the greatest beneficiary in light of his opposition to the Iraq invasion and his bare-knuckles assaults on Mr. Bush. These activists, though not a majority in their party, can be counted on to be aggressive foot soldiers in the winter presidential primaries.

Mr. Raskin acknowledges that the president's wide popularity in the country at large, based in part on his role as a wartime president and in part on his outgoing personality, will be difficult for any Democrat to overcome.

But these assembled liberals in exile reminded themselves they are not alone. And with 17 months until the next presidential election, there is still time for them to light a fire under a Democratic Party that needs a transfusion of the energy and commitment that was displayed at their rally to "take back America."

Jules Witcover writes from The Sun's Washington bureau. His column appears Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.