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Civil War on the Right

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By E. J. Dionne Jr.
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Conservatives are at each other's throats, and here's what's revealing about how divided they are: The critics of John McCain and the critics of Sarah Palin represent entirely different camps.

One set of critics, skeptical social conservatives, are precisely the people McCain was trying to mollify by picking Palin as his running mate. This includes the faithful of the religious right who remember McCain as their enemy in 2000 and parts of the gun crowd who always saw McCain as soft on their issues.

That McCain felt a need to make such an outlandishly risky choice speaks to how insecure his hold was on the core Republican vote. A candidate is supposed to rally the base during the primaries and reach out to the middle at election time. McCain got it backward, and it's hurting him.

A [Pew Research Center survey](#) this week found that among political independents, Palin's unfavorable rating has almost doubled since mid-September, from 27 to 50 percent. Whatever enthusiasm Palin inspired among conservative ideologues is more than offset by middle-of-the-road defections.

Even on the right, she hasn't done the job. In [The Post tracking poll](#) released yesterday, Barack Obama drew 22 percent of the vote from self-described conservatives. That's a seven-point gain on John Kerry's 2004 conservative share.

Yet the pro-Palin right is still impatient with McCain for not being tough enough -- as if he has not run one of the most negative campaigns in recent history. This camp believes that if McCain only shouted the names "Bill Ayers" and "Jeremiah Wright" at the top of his lungs, the whole election would turn around.

Then there are those conservatives who see Palin as a "fatal cancer to the Republican Party" ([David Brooks](#)), as someone who "doesn't know enough about economics and foreign policy to make Americans comfortable with a President Palin" ([Kathleen Parker](#)), as "a symptom and expression of a new vulgarization in American politics" ([Peggy Noonan](#)).

These conservatives deserve credit for acknowledging how ill-suited Palin is for high office. But what we see here is a deep split between parts of the conservative elite and much of the rank and file.

For years, many of the elite conservatives were happy to harvest the votes of devout Christians and gun owners by waging a phony class war against "liberal elitists" and "leftist intellectuals." Suddenly, the conservative writers are discovering that the very anti-intellectualism their side courted and encouraged has begun to consume their movement.

The cause of Edmund Burke, Leo Strauss, Robert Nisbet and William F. Buckley Jr. is now in the hands of Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity -- and Sarah Palin. Reason has been overwhelmed by

propaganda, ideas by slogans, learned manifestoes by direct-mail hit pieces.

And then there is George W. Bush. Conservatives once hailed him as creating an enduring majority on behalf of their cause. Now, they cast him as the goat in their story of decline.

The conservative critique of Bush is a familiar rant against his advocacy of big government and huge deficits -- now supplemented by horror over his embrace of actual socialism with the partial nationalization of big banks. And, yes, a fair number of conservatives were never wild about the adventure in Iraq.

Things are so bad that the internecine warriors on the right have begun copying the rhetoric of the old left. In a [Washington Times column](#) this week upbraiding dissidents such as Brooks and Noonan, Tony Blankley, the conservative writer and activist, fell back on an old left slogan, asking them: "Whose side are you on, comrade?"

This is a revelatory question. It arises when a movement has lost its sense of solidarity and purpose, when the "sides" are no longer clear. There is no unified "right" or "center-right," which is why we are no longer a conservative country, if we ever were.

Conservatism has finally crashed on problems for which its doctrines offered no solutions (the economic crisis foremost among them, thus Bush's apostasy) and on its refusal to acknowledge that the "real America" is more diverse, pragmatic and culturally moderate than the place described in Palin's speeches or imagined by the right-wing talk show hosts.

Conservatives came to believe that if they repeated phrases such as "Joe the Plumber" often enough, they could persuade working-class voters that policies tilted heavily in favor of the very privileged were actually designed with Joe in mind.

It isn't working anymore. No wonder conservatives are turning on each other so ferociously.

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