MoveOn for conservatives?

by Bill_Berkowitz

Fueled with Silicon Valley money, longtime conservative activist Rod Martin's 'TheVanguard.org' intends to carry the 'revolution forward'

The history of the modern conservative movement -- circa 1964 to the present -- is replete with its share of hucksters, snake oil salesman, rhetoricians, sexual deviants, mudslingers, marketers and one-hit wonders. But it also has had more than its fair share of visionaries, opportunists (in the best sense of that word), motivated entrepreneurs, perhaps even revolutionaries.

Rod Martin, the founder and head of a new conservative organization called TheVanguard.org -- linking Silicon Valley entrepreneurship with ideological zeal -- appears to consider himself a conservative revolutionary for the twenty-first century.

To carry the "revolution forward" -- a slogan featured on the group's website -- Martin, a Silicon Valley-seasoned entrepreneur and political activist, has launched TheVanguard.org.

In 1964, after the overwhelming defeat of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, a group of men -- white, youngish, and energetic -- "seized the time" -- to borrow a phrase from the left in the 1960s.

Richard Viguerie, who would become the king of conservative direct mail, delights in the Lincolnesque tale that has him trekking up to the General Accounting Office in Washington, D.C., after the 64 election, and with the help of a team of Kelly Girls (temporary workers), copied by hand the names and addresses of nearly 7,500 people that had contributed $50 of more to the Goldwater campaign.

With additional names garnered from other conservative groups, Viguerie "launched the era of computer-managed political fundraising eventually building a direct-mail empire that would raise untold millions of dollars in support of organizations, candidates, and causes that made up what Viguerie dubbed the New Right, by which he meant a conservative movement more focused in its aims and more committed to winning than the 'echo' Republicans whose day, he felt, was over," William Martin wrote in his book "With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America."

At about the same time Paul Weyrich, now widely considered the godfather of the New Right, was becoming its Johnny Appleseed. He tells of how he unobtrusively observed liberals in their habitat, and was impressed by a number of things. Weyrich spent the next several years translating those lessons, snaring wealthy conservative businessmen, and planting the seeds of the conservative infrastructure; developing the ideological "think tank" -- the Heritage Foundation -- and folding conservative Christian evangelicals into the movement through the creation of the Moral Majority -- which introduced the Rev. Jerry Falwell to the American people.

In 1988, after losing his bid to be the GOP's presidential standard bearer, the Rev. Pat Robertson didn't mourn, he organized. A reluctant candidate at first -- Weyrich encouraged him to run -- Robertson's mixture of faith and politics and, as New York Times religion writer Dudley Clendinen wrote, his ability to "apply the tools and skills of modern television evangelism to presidential politics," played well early. He was eventually defeated, however, by the well-oiled Bush team spearheaded by the now legendary hardballer, Lee Atwater.

Instead of folding his tent in despair, Robertson turned that defeat into the launching of the Christian Coalition. He signed on the baby-faced, seemingly non-threatening and mega-articulate Ralph Reed -- these days so deeply associated with the Jack Abramoff scandal that his bid to become the lieutenant governor of Georgia was derailed in the GOP primary -- to be the organization's executive director. Together, they established the gold standard for Christian right grassroots organizations: bringing in boatloads of contributions, lobbying effectively for its causes, establishing a generally positive presence in the mainstream media, grabbing a seat -- and then some -- at the political table, and becoming the go-to organization for GOP political candidates.

By 1994, with most of the pieces in place including a highly-functional infrastructure of right wing foundations, think tanks, advocacy organizations, media outlets -- conservative talk radio and Christian television -- an army of grassroots volunteers and, at the urging of Weyrich, a willingness to work well with

others despite political differences, Newt Gingrich led conservatives to the promised land: the takeover of Congress.

It's a little over a decade later and youngish conservatives are again restless. Embittered by defeat at the hands of the Democratic party in November, which they attribute to the "Republican leadership s[elling] conservatives out," these new activists are calling for a "new conservative movement."

In a relatively short time, Rod Martin has made a name for himself as an up-and-coming organizer out to transform the conservative movement.

At present, there are several noteworthy things about TheVanguard.org: the origin of its name; its stated goal to both emulate and take on MoveOn.org; its mix of Silicon Valley pedigree and fundraising sources with veteran movement conservatives; its weaving of so-called traditional religious principles with secular conservatism; and its hiring of dedicated slash-and-burn right wing ideologues.

Vanguard: The term "vanguard" -- derived from the Middle English "vantgard" short for "avant garde" -- is defined in "The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language" as "the foremost position in an army or fleet," "the... leading position in a trend or movement," and "those occupying such a position."

The term also has its roots firmly planted in Vladimir Ilyich Ulnayov (Lenin), the Russian revolutionary, who developed the idea of the Vanguard Party, and wrote about it in the 1902 pamphlet titled "What is to Be Done?" According to Wikipedia, "a vanguard party is a political party or grassroot organization at the forefront of a mass action, movement, or revolution."

Taking on MoveOn: Like his conservative forefathers, particularly Weyrich, in a recent interview with the conservative weekly Human Events, Martin paid tribute to, and takes aim at, the liberal internet-based MoveOn,org. "The left has been brilliant at leveraging technology," Martin said, "and so have we to a point: our bloggers and news sites are amazing, and the RNC's [Republican National Committee] get-out-the-vote software is unparalleled. But no one on our side has even begun to create anything like MoveOn. And after

2006, if we want to survive, much less build a long-term conservative majority, we better start, and fast."

And in a letter to supporters posted at TheVanguard.org website Martin pointed out that "the issue isn't just taking the fight to MoveOnâ€¦. [it] is also learning a lesson from MoveOn, by taking on -- and taking back -- our own party first. MoveOn has done a great job of making the Democrat Party live up to the ideology of its membership. That may or may not be a good idea from an election point-of-view. But it's certainly been rewarding for the people who give their hearts and souls to electing Democrats year after year."

Silicon Valley meets movement conservatives: Martin, who has both entrepreneurial -- he worked for PayPal -- and movement experience -- he is a member of the Federalist Society and the secretive Council on National Policy among other far right groups -- has reeled in "a top-drawer cast, including Silicon Valley heavy-hitters like Eric Jackson (a former PayPal colleague of Martin's, where he was head of marketing) and Gil Amelio (former CEO of two Fortune 500 companies, including Apple Computer), among others," Human Events reported.

In addition, longtime movement conservatives such as Grover Norquist, founder and head of American for Tax Reform, Stephen Moore, founder of Club for Growth (and current Wall Street Journal editorial board member), "compassionate conservatism" guru Marvin Olasky, and Reagan Doctrine-architect Jack Wheeler are all members of Vanguard's board of advisors.

Hiring hardballers: While Martin may be the force behind TheVangaurd.org, two recent hires could easily become the group's most controversial figures. In late-January, TheVanguard.org hired Jerome Corsi, co-author with John O'Neill of 2004's "Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry," -- which seriously damaged the Kerry campaign in November 2004 -- to become a "senior political strategist â€¦ researching and writing aggressively to advance conservative themes in opposition to liberal Democratic Party politics," Corsi explained in Human Events.

The other new employee is Richard Poe, a longtime journalist and former employee of conservative provocateur/entrepreneur David Horowitz, who is the group's editorial and creative director. Poe recently co-authored, with Horowitz, "The Shadow Party: How George Soros, Hillary Clinton, and Sixties Radicals Seized Control of the Democratic Party," a book that accuses liberals of using deception, lies, and Soros' dough to take over the country.

Poe has also been a close observer of Hillary Clinton, having penned "Hillary's Secret War," which according to the author, describes "how Hillary Clinton and the left's 'shadow government' have labored to put her and her far-left agenda in the White House by controlling the still-uncensored flow of real news to Americans -- via the Internet."

Frederick Clarkson, the author of "Eternal Hostility," a primer on the theocratic right in the United States, and a longtime observer of U.S. right-wing politics, told me in an e-mail exchange that "TheVanguard.org epitomizes the tactics of the far right of the contemporary Republican Party."

"The recent addition of Jerome Corsi -- a leader of the 'swiftboat veterans for truth' which ran a vicious smear campaign against Sen. John Kerry when he ran for president, as the 'senior political strategist' is a fair indication of how it plans to use the powerful tool of the internet and the blogosphere."

"It is also startling to me that one of TheVanguard's advisers is Jack Wheeler, best known as an unofficial liaison to groups seeking to overthrow governments opposed by the Reagan White House, notably in Nicaragua, Mozambique, Afghanistan and Angola," Clarkson said. "It is strange that a prominent advocate of armed insurgencies is such a public advisor to a domestic political group."

These days, with the Human Events piece in hand, and the hiring of "Swiftboater" Corsi, and left-basher Poe, TheVanguard.org reports that its site traffic is rising and blog buzz is building. Whether this will "Forward the Revolution" as Martin intends, remains to be seen.