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The New Yorker

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The Enemy Within

Posted by *George Packer*

Foreign policy isn't getting much play at the Republican National Convention. Here inside the hall, where the mangled video of Barack Obama supposedly saying, "If you have a business, you didn't build that" is playing on a seemingly endless loop, there's no word of it. But ask the Tea Party Patriots what they think of Obama's foreign policy and you get a full-throated answer. They held a tribute to the military this afternoon under a sweaty tent on a piece of concrete in downtown Tampa outside the convention perimeter that the Tea Party has occupied and christened Liberty Plaza. Every speaker wanted more war, not less—bloodier, simpler war—a message not completely at odds with the views of Mitt Romney and his senior foreign-policy advisers. The theme of the event was dishonor and defeat, and by the end some speakers were openly accusing Obama of working for the enemy.

An ex-Army Ranger named Sean Parnell, who looks like the movie version of the part (and is the author of the Hollywood-sounding "Outlaw Platoon: Heroes, Renegades, Infidels, and the Brotherhood of War in Afghanistan"), stood up and said that, when he left Afghanistan, in 2007, the U.S. was about to put that war away, only to watch it move toward defeat under Obama. "We have a First Lady who says she's ashamed to be an American," he thundered. "Why do we want to refashion America in the image of Spain?" Jon Voight, a real actor who once played a veteran, spoke as well, and so did Representative Louie Gohmert, the Texas fellow-travelling birther and Muslim-baiter.

Gohmert served in the peacetime Army during the Carter years. He hypothesized that if only Jimmy Carter had had the guts to go to war with Iran during the hostage crisis in 1979, there might not have been a September

11th. “Who would believe President Carter would have someone who could run him up as the worst commander-in-chief in history?” That would be Obama, Gohmert went on, who prefers to lay waste to a country that loves us—Iran—with economic sanctions, while refusing to solve the nuclear problem by going after the leadership. If Obama had learned the lesson of Vietnam (when you go to war, go with everything you’ve got, take out the enemy, then leave), we wouldn’t have abandoned Iraq, would be winning in Afghanistan, and would take out the Iranian mullahs next.

But the saddest moment came when two “Gold Star” parents from Florida, Billy and Karen Vaughn, rose to denounce the President for getting their son, Navy SEAL Aaron Vaughn, killed. He died with twenty-nine others on August 6, 2011, when a Chinook helicopter was shot down over Wardak Province, in Afghanistan. “Due to the President’s negligent if not criminal behavior,” Mrs. Vaughn said, the rules of engagement prevented air support from returning fire against the Taliban who brought the Chinook down. “At the very least, this Administration put a target on my son’s back. And I’ll let you draw your own conclusions about what the worst could be.” She seemed to be suggesting that Obama might have wanted Aaron Vaughn dead.

Mr. Vaughn’s voice broke, but he was just as angry as his wife. “The events of August 6, 2011, are a direct result of a pattern, an ideology, and a strategy put forth by this Administration,” he said. “It’s widely said this President is a nice guy but he’s incompetent. I believe he is very competent. The failure to recognize the enemy of our republic could be our death knell.” He didn’t need to say who that enemy was.

When you go to these side events, the tent shows on the margins of the convention hall, you feel the true source of the Party’s energy this year. It isn’t about Paul Ryan, though he’s a favorite. Sarah Palin doesn’t get a mention. Rick Santorum got a big cheer before giving the most sanctimonious speech in convention history, but he’s already a has-been. Ron Paul has his hard core, and they are here, causing a bit of trouble, but he’s already gone off into the sunset. God knows it isn’t about Mitt Romney—no one’s name elicits a less hearty cheer on the floor of the hall.

The energy is hatred—hatred of Barack Obama, and hatred of what the people here believe he’s done to their country, their principles, and their children.