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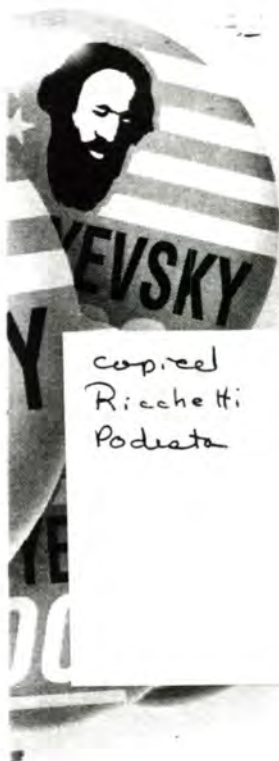
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Under the Big Tent



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Inquisitor

as a whole, it is impossible to say what final, authoritative meaning the novel leaves with us. If Alyosha speaks the final, joyful words of faith, for most readers they don't cancel out Ivan's "damned questions," his wrestling with the darkness of the soul in a grim world where it seems reasonable to say that "everything is permitted."

As a political and spiritual parable, "The Grand Inquisitor" is ambiguous. It offers no authoritative answer. It suggests that truth lies only in the dialogue, open-ended, anguishing. It might be recommended reading for writers of party platforms, which tend toward self-righteous authoritative pronouncements on anguishing issues.

The rhetoric of "compassionate conservatism" is belied by a smug claim to truth on a host of social issues. The G.O.P. might also ponder another moment in "The Grand Inquisitor," when the Inquisitor imagines still another voice in the dialogue — the voice of the utopian protester, like some of those heard outside the Philadelphia convention hall: "Do you know that centuries will pass and mankind will proclaim with the mouth of its wisdom and science that there is no crime, and therefore no sin, but only hungry men? Feed them first, then ask virtue of them!" □

PHILADELPHIA
What can you say about a Republican Convention that spends as much time talking about AIDS as abortion, and frets more about urban blight than gun control? That it's a changed party? A conflicted party? A sneaker party?

"The platform is solid," shrugged Gary Bauer, the former pro-life presidential candidate. You will remember him as the guy who fell off the stage during a pancake-flipping contest before the New Hampshire primary. He added, "Anybody who's pro-life on Election Day will vote for us, and anybody who's pro-choice will vote for the other side."

Wrong message. Under George W. Bush the Republican Party is one big, huge, enormous, humongous tent. Mr. Bush is asking for the vote of every single American who supports restoring dignity to the presidency and not leaving a single child behind. Those yearning for an undignified chief executive and a pile of children stranded without transportation are just going to have to go elsewhere.

Coming to grips with the Bush candidacy is tricky, since a lot goes unsaid in this campaign. Until Dick Cheney gave his red-meat speech on Wednesday night, the Republican Convention had gone for three days without ever mentioning Bill Clinton's name. We were in Harry Potter land, and the president was Lord Voldemort, the villain so villainous he can be referred to only as "You-Know-Who." (Mr. Cheney was a hit with the delegates, who had been languishing on topics like "Prosperity With a Purpose: Keeping America Prosperous." However, many people who saw him on TV felt the new vice-presidential candidate had all the warmth and charm of an armadillo.)

The Republican Convention was full of delegates who had become party activists so they could promote their social agenda, yet Mr. Bush managed to drag them through this entire convention without one televised peep about the right to bear arms, or even about prayer in school. Every black Republican who's ever been elected to a county road commission was given a speaking role, but Alan Keyes, the black presidential candidate who's the darling of the anti-abortion movement, was nowhere in sight. Until Mr. Bush devoted a sentence to the unborn last night, the only person I heard bring up abortion was a Senate candidate from Nebraska who was distinctly off

prime time. Mr. Bush's own message — that we can all work together, and that partial birth abortion is bad — sounded stunningly moderate compared with the diatribes from conventions of yore.

In a way, this isn't much different from what Bill Clinton did in 1992, when he pulled his party to the center while placating its left by muffling Robert Casey, the pro-life governor of Pennsylvania. But at least the Democrats didn't keep their positions secret. You'd have had to be living in a cave not to know what Mr. Clinton

You-know-who on you-know-what.

intended to do about abortions and gun control. Mr. Bush is less forthcoming. Watching the convention, all you might be able to deduce is that whatever he plans, it's going to be accomplished to the music of Motown.

Still, it's easy enough to read his intentions. His surrogates forcefully stripped the platform of all signs of immigrant-bashing, and made an unsuccessful attempt to moderate the plank opposing gays in the military. The convention's rainbow coalition of speakers did at least send a message that Mr. Bush is going to have blacks in his cabinet and regards immigrants as a group worthy of a well-placed pander. One of the very, very few middle-aged white men who got on stage was the Republican Party's only openly gay Congressman.

But there was no effort to mitigate the party's sweeping declaration of war against all forms of abortion, and no hint Mr. Bush ever intended to do battle with his core constituency on that issue. "He does not want to fight," said Tommy Thompson, the long-suffering chairman of the platform committee, who kept demanding credit for having allowed pro-choice Republicans to speak at the hearings. "The Republican Party is a pro-life party, but it's never been so open," he said repeatedly.

When it comes to abortion, George W. Bush's move to the center consists solely of his willingness to accept the votes of people who disagree with him. The tent is huge, but the ringmaster is only listening to the folks who entered from the right. □