

Young Americans for Freedom Say the Time Is Right for a Resurgence

■ **Politics:** Mostly out of action since the Reagan era, the GOP's conservative shock troops gird for national offensive at colleges.

By JEAN O. PASCO
TIMES STAFF WRITER

If politics bring to mind bloody baby dolls, burning flags and public taunting, then welcome to the Young Americans for Freedom, a cadre of dedicated conservatives known as the shock troops of the Republican Party.

For 38 years, this group of mostly college-age men has delighted in hit-and-run vigilante activism from California to Washington.

"Yaffers" have hanged actress Jane Fonda in effigy. They've burned flags of the United Nations and China, and branded opponents "Com-symp," for Communist sympathizers. They've stalked state Sen. Tom Hayden, a 1960s antiwar organizer, with bullhorn chants of "Commie Tommie."

But throughout the 1990s, the Yaffers have been relatively quiet. They haven't had a national figurehead since Ronald Reagan was president, and shifting political moods have left them out of the limelight.

Now the Yaffers are preparing for a resurgence in California and across the nation.

Last month, former Vice President Dan Quayle sent letters to GOP stalwarts across the country appealing for funds for an aggressive campaign to organize YAF chapters at every college campus.

"No other conservative youth organization has played a more important role in the development of conservative leaders than Young Americans for Freedom," Quayle

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wrote. He and Sen. John Ashcroft of Missouri are courting YAF support for their expected bids for president in 2000.

YAF is gearing up for battle in Orange County in November on behalf of former Rep. Robert K. Dornan, who lost his Garden Grove-based seat to Democrat Loretta Sanchez in 1996. Statewide, the group plans demonstrations on behalf of an initiative that would allow casino-style gambling on Indian reservations, arguing that Native Americans have a sovereign right to manage their own affairs.

"YAF is coming back and the conservative movement is coming back," declared California YAF Chairman Brian Park, a 21-year-old business major at Chapman University, which fields a growing group of Yaffers.

Park already has engaged in the kind of pranks that used to give Yaffers notoriety.

In January, he dressed in doctor whites at a Planned Parenthood rally that featured Sanchez and held a baby doll awash in red paint to demonstrate the late-term abortion procedure that the congresswoman voted to uphold.

And they're not beyond using similar graphic images on behalf of those they support.

"Bob Dornan has the heart of a liberal. Really. It's sitting on his desk in a jar," joked national Vice Chairman Matt Zandi, 25, of Mission Viejo.

Yaffers have maintained a presence in the California Republican Party's activist corps largely because of the popularity of Reagan, a YAF supporter who remains the group's honorary national chairman.

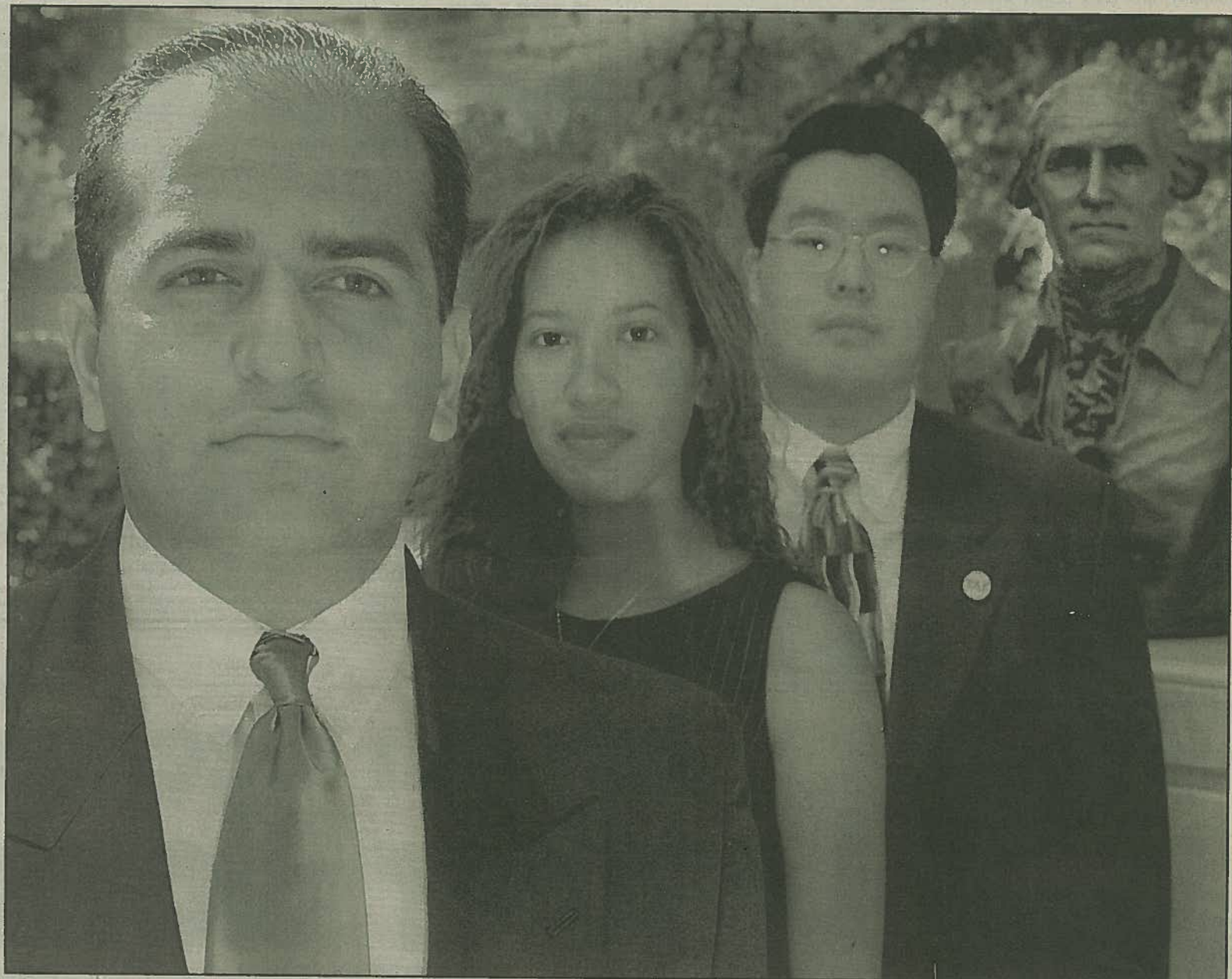
Orange County is the headquarters for the state organization, which draws its strength from such alumni as Reps. Dana Rohrabacher of Huntington Beach, Christopher Cox of Newport Beach and Ed Royce of Fullerton; state Sen. John R. Lewis of Orange; and state GOP treasurer Shawn Steele.

Born in 1960 at the Sharon, Conn., home of conservative commentator William F. Buckley, the movement hit its zenith in the 1980s with Reagan's presidency. Its hallmark was unapologetic displays—verbal and physical—challenging what the group perceived as the creeping of American political thought toward an homogenous center.

Members claim that YAF's model for its in-your-face, have-mob-will-travel tactics was Students for a Democratic Society, its left-leaning counterpart founded in 1961. The street theatrics on both sides were meant to shake up the status quo and bring attention to the cause.

"It's the only way to wake up young people in this numb, short-attention-span generation," said Ursula Williams, 20, a new recruit from Long Beach. "That's what attracted me the most. It's shock therapy."

Estimates based on mailing lists puts YAF membership nationally



GLENN KOENIG / Los Angeles Times

"People are in YAF because of principles, not politics," says Vice Chairman Matt Zandi, left, with Ursula Williams and Brian Park at Chapman University.

at about 55,000. California, with a mailing list of 10,000, accounts for nearly one-fifth of the membership. Park and Zandi estimate that about 200 are active members in Southern California, most from Orange and San Diego counties.

For many, the group's allure is its uncompromising allegiance to anti-Communism, free-market opportunity, opposition to affirmative-action policies and racial quotas, and strict adherence to "traditional values."

Increasingly, the latter has meant staunch opposition to abortion—the kind of issue that caters to the group's adrenaline-pumping protests. When YAF members are

for him."

She said their value to the campaign is immeasurable.

Zandi said the group supports Dornan because he hasn't wavered on his principles.

Other politicians, such as former Yaffer and current Assemblyman Curt Pringle of Garden Grove, haven't been perceived as favorably. Last year, after Pringle supported a state budget that included funding for family planning, Yaffers kicked him off their advisory board and distributed literature at the state GOP convention condemning him as a "cancer on the conservative

because they intend to use the involvement as further proof of Dornan's extremism.

Democratic Party official Bob Mulholland said most Californians find the kind of politics practiced by Dornan and YAF "despicable."

He said other former Yaffers—called OAFs for Old Americans for Freedom—have crossed the line between ill-mannered and illegal in their quest to make the ends justify the means.

Former Assemblyman Pat Nolan of Glendale, for instance, served 33 months in jail after pleading guilty in 1993 to a federal racketeering charge involving influence peddling. Lewis was indicted in 1986 for allegedly forging Reagan's signature on fake White House stationery during a campaign. The indictment later was dismissed.

Political science professor Mark P. Petracca, a Democrat, has taught a parade of YAF students, including Zandi, in his 13 years at UC Irvine. "They have a disruptive presence. It's not a productive or constructive presence, it's more of an aggravation," Petracca said. "But that's not distinct from any other student organization."

"The thing that always bothered me about the Yaffers was . . . they always had all the answers," he said.

"But despite my obvious political disagreements, I always had very interesting exchanges with them. If I had a choice between five Yaffers and five randomly selected students, I'd pick five Yaffers any day. They have a developed interest in political ideas, and that's a good thing, if you put aside the occasional act of childishness."

What others see as pranks, Yaffers see as their constitutional right to freedom of expression. Only more so.

Back in 1973, Dornan and YAF member Jim Lacy defiantly hung

Fonda in effigy as she spoke on the USC campus about her opposition to the Vietnam War. Dornan, who had just lost an election for mayor of Los Angeles, got into a shoving match with Fonda's bodyguards. Fonda eventually acknowledged the hecklers and invited the group to sing the national anthem. They did.

Lacy, who has lost races for congressional and Assembly seats, hasn't burned anyone in effigy for years, but he supports "YAF members' right to carry on the tradition."

"YAF should be able to have bold demonstrations and engage in political activity that challenges the center," he said. "YAF was always intended as being a cutting-edge organization that would push politics further to a political extreme."

"That's not exactly building a huge majority sentiment that includes moderates," the Dana Point resident acknowledged.

A lawyer and former YAF national chairman, Lacy also is a trustee of YAF educational affiliate Young America's Foundation in Fairfax, Va. In April, the foundation spent \$4.5 million to buy the Reagans' 680-acre ranch north of Santa Barbara.

The foundation intends to use the Reagans' Rancho del Cielo for a Ronald Reagan Leadership Development Program. Lacy said the group this week submitted a bid to buy an adjacent Presbyterian center that can house up to 180 students in dormitories.

The goal, Lacy said, is to educate a new generation of conservatives, and Zandi hopes to be one of them.

"Our goal, my goal, is not to make this country a right-wing state," Zandi said. "Different people have different views. But if you're a conservative, we don't want a blurring of that line. Do we go too far? Not if you're standing by your principles."

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20-year-old new YAF recruit from Long Beach

asked to name their top reasons for joining, opposition to abortion invariably is among them.

Dornan's wife, Sallie, said the group has been supportive in every Dornan battle, including his fight against abortion, and expects this campaign to be no different.

"They do their own thing," she said. "We usually demand to see or hear anything they're going to do because they can be pretty aggressive on their own and you don't have much control. But as far as loving and respecting Bob, they do, and they'll be very active

movement."

"People are in YAF because of principles, not politics," said Zandi, who emigrated with his family from Iran in 1986. "We're dedicated to the conservative movement, not to individuals, and that's why the movement has been successful. Unlike other organizations, our members aren't interested in joining for getting political jobs or [for] resume-building."

Critics of the group say its fraternity-style high jinks are offensive and infantile. Some expressed delight that YAF will become involved locally in the Dornan race