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The Movable Buffet: Dispatches from Las Vegas by Richard Abowitz

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Topless Sarah Palin lookalike contest

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Last night I went to a bar at the Orleans Casino to watch the debate with activists from Nevada's McCain campaign to report for Las Vegas Weekly (where I am on staff). The celebrity at the event was the governor of Hawaii. I was told she was too busy to do an interview for Las Vegas Weekly. This happened as I watched her giving an extended interview to the local Fox affiliate. Fox News was also the network the local Republicans chose for watching the debate on the bar's dozen or so screens (except for the one discreetly turned to the Dodgers game).

Republicans in other states might find it odd that some of their number in Vegas meet in a casino to play video poker at a bar while cheering on their conservative candidate. But in Nevada, social conservatism is very weak; instead, the Republican Party here has a thick libertarian streak. That meant in every single interview I did after the debate, when I asked these Nevada Republicans what issue matters most to them, all agreed: a deep opposition to more taxes.

Regardless of party affiliation, Nevada's prominence as a coveted swing state has caused a focus on this election like I have never before seen here among locals. Usually, Vegas resorts and employees are forcefully politically neutral. (The exception being Vegas gadfly Sheldon Adelson, who I think it is fair to describe as a major donation source for conservative groups.) For example, none of the cocktail servers at the debate viewing party at Orleans yesterday would answer a question about how well the Republicans were tipping them. As a tourism city, Vegas does not want to offend. Even the comedians tend to stay clear of political material. But with this election cycle, that is changing. And now politics, if not actual partisanship, is pervading Vegas from the comedians all the way to the topless bars.

Exhibit one: Club Paradise across the street from the Hard Rock is holding an "official" Sarah Palin lookalike pageant on Oct. 23, advertised with a flier that includes a doctored photo of the candidate. I have no idea what is meant by "official" in this context, except that I was assured yesterday that it does not mean the event is in any way endorsed by Nevada's McCain-Palin campaign. No surprise there. According to the manager of Club Paradise: "We have invited girls who resemble Sarah Palin from clubs all over the country to join us for the pageant."

The press release notes: "The guests will cast their votes based on the contestants' debating skills in addition to how well they match up to Sarah Palin in a swimsuit. The winner of the contest will be awarded over \$10,000 in cash and prizes, including a trip for two to Washington D.C. for the presidential inauguration in January 2009." This is politics Vegas style.

(Illustration courtesy Club Paradise)

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