

Friends of Abe

A refuge for Hollywood conservatives

By John Gizzi

Summary: For the past 11 years, the organization Friends of Abe has facilitated the fellowship of conservatives in Hollywood. Members met regularly to mingle, discuss job opportunities, and listen to speakers, all while keeping their membership secret and exclusive. Unexpectedly, the group has recently decided to disband.

The news bulletin on April 22 resonated within Hollywood and nationwide: Friends of Abe, the 11-year-old group of Hollywood conservatives, was disbanding. Throughout its brief but eventful life, the group was considered a gathering spot for 1,800-plus conservatives in the entertainment industry, from superstars such as Jon Voight and Clint Eastwood to aspiring directors and scriptwriters to workers on production crews.

In announcing its twilight scene, Friends of Abe (FOA) Executive Director Jeremy Boreing told reporters: “Today, because we have been



A rare patriot in modern Hollywood: acclaimed actor Gary Sinise founded Friends of Abe so fellow conservatives in Tinseltown could feel less alone in a sea of left-wingers.

successful in creating a community that extends far beyond our events, people just don’t feel as much of a need to show up for every speaker or bar night, and fewer people pay the dues that help us maintain that large infrastructure.”

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Other FOA members and observers insist there are other reasons for its taking a bow at this time—notably the incendiary nature of the Republican presidential race and particularly the controversy that surrounds Donald Trump.

But that's not to say Friends of Abe wasn't a worthwhile organization while it lasted.

For more than a generation, the phrases “Hollywood conservative” and “conservative entertainer” have been typically viewed as oxymorons. Although there was a time when the brightest stars in the Hollywood galaxy were almost uniformly Republican, the entertainment industry has long since been a pillar of the Democratic Party. As candidates and later as presidents, Democrats Bill

Clinton and Barack Obama made regular pilgrimages to Hollywood to raise oceans of campaign cash.

Virtually all major producers and studio heads are Democrats, and the fundraising events at their homes almost always benefit Democratic candidates and left-wing causes. Republicans—let alone conservative Republicans—need not apply.

So when an 1,800-member organization on the Left Coast became increasingly characterized as a “safe haven” for “conservative-minded individuals in Hollywood,” it was major news—right up until the recent announcement that it is disbanding.

Founded in 2004 by actor Gary Sinise and two of his friends in the entertainment industry, “Friends of Abe” (FOA)—named after Abraham Lincoln—became a regular gathering point for people from all income levels in the business who happen to be conservative Republicans.

“Friends of Abe doesn't make decisions, endorse candidates, or even hold meetings following ‘Robert's Rules of Order,’” according to satirist Evan Sayet, one of FOA's members. “Basically, it's a group of folks from gaffers [electricians responsible for the lighting on a movie or TV set] to the celebrities.”

Every month, noted Sayet, “we get together and share fellowship with others who share our values.”

But, in the last year, FOA also attracted publicity in part because of the big names in its ranks. Among the Friends of Abe who are open about membership are founder Sinise, Jon Voight (who campaigned hard for Mitt Romney in 2012 and recently endorsed Donald Trump for president), and Kelsey Grammer (who earned media coverage in February by participating in the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C.).

Others identified as members of FOA or occasional visitors to the group's gatherings include Drew Carey (host of the game show “The Price is Right”), Patricia Heaton (“Everybody Loves Raymond”), Bruce Willis, Clint Eastwood, TV producer Jerry Bruckheimer, and Adam Sandler.

Other entertainers associated with FOA include Kevin Sorbo (“Hercules”), Scott Baio (“Chachi” from “Happy Days”), John Ratzenberger (“Cliff the Mailman” from “Cheers”), John Schneider (“Bo Duke” from “The Dukes of Hazard”), Bo Derek (*10*), Jim Caviezel (Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*), and character actor Powers Boothe, famed for his portrayal of the diabolical Rev. Jim Jones in a made-for-TV biopic.

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For all of the downplaying of its political influence by Sayet and other members, Friends of Abe has attracted some notable Republican names as speakers at its regular gatherings: House Speaker Paul Ryan, former Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain, and 2016 presidential contenders Ted Cruz and Donald Trump (who reportedly drew a record 500 attendees to the FOA meeting he addressed).

So how could a group with this kind of following just suddenly disband?

FOA, according to the *New York Times*, “fiercely protects its membership.” The recent publicity the group has received from its guest speakers coupled with the prolonged IRS investigation into FOA’s request for non-profit status, involving repeated government requests for membership lists and names of financial backers could be the impetus for disbanding. So long and so grueling was the IRS probe that it was denounced by no less a figure than Texas Sen. and presidential candidate Ted Cruz.

At this point, then, the saga of the rise and fall of Friends of Abe should be read as a cautionary tale.

Becoming an “Endangered Species” in Hollywood

It’s been many decades since the entertainment industry had a substantial community of Republicans, much less conservatives. Jimmy Stewart, Charlton Heston, Efrem Zimbalist Jr., Robert Stack, and, of course, Ronald

Today, it is difficult—if not impossible—to identify a high-powered entertainment figure who is a noted Republican. The entertainment industry is not only a mecca of liberalism but a veritable ATM machine for the Democratic Party.

Reagan, are all gone. To a man, all were not only Republicans, but very active in politics and in their support for right-leaning causes. (Reagan had been a New Deal Democrat before he shifted to the right.)

Today, it is difficult—if not impossible—to identify a high-powered major entertainment figure who is a noted Republican, let alone an outspoken conservative Republican. The generations that followed Reagan, Zimbalist, and company in what Hollywood calls “the business” have not produced many in their mold.

For the most part, the entertainment industry is not only a mecca of liberalism but a veritable ATM machine for the Democratic Party and left-of-center causes. Actor and filmmaker Sean Penn, directors Rob “Meathead” Reiner, Oliver Stone, and Norman Lear, along with actors like Susan Sarandon, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Mark Ruffalo are emblematic of the decidedly left-of-center activists.

Coupled with the liberal-progressive dominance of the political culture in Hollywood is what those on the right characterize as “blacklisting”—denying employment to those who are identified as conservative or Republican.

“A friend of mine who was having difficulty obtaining parts said he knew for a fact the reason was because the studios knew he was an active Republican,” singer-actor Pat Boone recalled to this reporter back in 1999. (I later learned he was speaking of the late Victor Jory, the character actor famed as the sinister Jonas Wilkerson in *Gone with the Wind* and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.)

The rare entertainer who wears his or her conservatism as if it were an Olympic gold medal is the one who has what Charlton Heston charac-

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terized as “go to Hell money.” The legendary actor, best known for portraying Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, campaigned for Republican candidates and went on to be the longest-serving president of the National Rifle Association because, by the time he was in his sixties, he had accumulated enough of a fortune to tell producers critical of his politics to “go to Hell.”

A similar example is Tom Selleck, famed from his years as the private eye on the TV series “Magnum P.I.” and now heading into his sixth season as a star of the hit police drama “Bluebloods.” Selleck is an active NRA member, a proponent of the right to keep and bear arms, and a vigorous advocate of the flat tax.

But other entertainers who presumably have fortunes large enough to qualify as “go to Hell money” and are considered conservative, nonetheless shy away from the Republican Party and political involvement in general. Producer-actor Mel Gibson, for example, is worth an estimated \$425 million. Gibson is widely known for his outspoken criticism of the post-Vatican II changes within the Roman Catholic Church and is a proponent of the traditional Latin Mass. But beyond that, Gibson has no record of involvement in any cause that may tag him as a conservative. There is no evidence that the directorial genius behind *The Passion of the Christ*

and *Apocalypto* has supported the Republican Party or its candidates. Actress Roma Downey and husband Mark Burnette are in a similar situation. Burnette is president of the MGM Television and Digital Group and won plaudits from the Christian community for producing the cable television series “The Bible.” Seen by more than 100 million viewers worldwide, “The Bible” is the fastest-selling TV title released on home video in the past five years and the top-selling miniseries title ever during its first week of sale. Earlier this year, the couple were featured as speakers at the National Prayer Breakfast. But neither Downey nor Burnette are involved in politics in any notable way. Neither speaks out on any controversial issues.

It is in this atmosphere that Friends of Abe was conceived in 2004 and within which it operated for the past 11 years.

“Liberty Loves Company”

When actor Gary Sinise gathered two like-minded friends together in 2004 and organized Friends of Abe, it was, as Evan Sayet put it, “almost totally by accident.”

“They were commiserating about how hard it was to be a Republican in the entertainment industry,” recalled Sayet. “Pretty soon, they agreed to come back the following week and bring other friends. And then those friends were asked to come back and bring other friends and, well, now you have 1,800

or so meeting for drinks every week.” The motto of Friends of Abe is “Liberty Loves Company.” There is, of course, a lot more to the Friends of Abe saga than that. Another co-founder, British-born screenwriter Lionel Chetwynd, long a visible Republican, expanded the group to the point that, in 2010, it began holding weekly luncheons at the storied Barney’s Beanery in West Hollywood to share tips on opportunities for work. “A job fair,” is how Chetwynd described the weekly FOA luncheons to one reporter.

Chetwynd and Sinise are both figures of consequence in the modern entertainment community. Chetwynd wrote the 1981 made-for-television movie *Miracle on Ice* that told the story of the triumphant U.S. hockey team at the winter Olympics a year before. He also wrote the gut-wrenching 1987 film *The Hanoi Hilton* about the treatment of U.S. prisoners of war in North Vietnam.

Sinise is a bona fide movie star: touching audiences as “Lieutenant Dan” in the beloved movie *Forrest Gump* and turning in stirring performances as Alabama Gov. George Wallace and president Harry Truman in television biopics. His conservatism and deep admiration for Ronald Reagan are well-known. When Sinise portrayed police lieutenant Mac Taylor on TV’s long-running “CSI: New York,” his character displayed a large portrait of Reagan in his office.

Sinise has a passion for helping veterans, and he regularly performs at bases throughout the world with his “Lieutenant Dan Band.” He certainly makes his political views known, having made substantial donations to Republican presidential candidates John McCain in 2008 and Mitt Romney in 2012. But fans of Sinise will no doubt be surprised to learn that, as his spokeswoman told reporters, “He is not registered with any political party.”

Because of their wholly justified concern about possible job discrimination should their views and associations become known, members of Friends of Abe have several guarantees of secrecy. Unless a member makes himself or herself known, the membership list of FOA remains a secret. The group’s website, AbesPal.com, is available to members only. There are no member dues and the group does not discuss its financial affairs. FOA has, however, been annually filing the standard federal disclosure document used by 501(c)(3) nonprofits since at least 2011.

According to its most recent publicly available filing for the year ending Dec. 31, 2014, FOA is headquartered on the Avenue of the Stars in Los Angeles. Its mission statement is, “to sponsor various types of educational forums, panels, and lectures concerning issues affecting the public interest, and approach such issues from a conservative perspective.”

It had a budget of just over \$200,000 in 2014 and just one employee. That year FOA took in \$147,170 in contributions and grants and \$81,880 in program revenues. It ended 2014 with \$157,578 in net assets.

Gray-listed by Hollywood

“If certain studio execs—hirers and firers—learn that this is a movement and growing,” Pat Boone, himself a “Friend of Abe,” told the *Washington Times* in 2008, “and that some of these people that they hire are of this inclination, these people could be unemployed.”

“It’s a secret organization that protects its members because of the fear they’ll lose work,” Sayet said flatly. “And the member who will be hurt is the little guy, the gaffer on the Gap commercial. He could easily be ‘gray-listed.’ In other words, he won’t be denied work forever, but when there’s work, the producers will try to go to several others before him.

“If they know you’re a conservative—or even more devastating, an active conservative—they would just not rather work with you and unless you’re a big name—and therefore, a commodity—it’s easy for them to just go to the next guy on their list of ‘preferred’ talents and use them instead.” Asked by reporters the exact number of members in FOA, Chetwynd replied without hesitation: “That’s a

secret. Let’s just say our last event had 1,800—and we’re sold out for the next one.”

It is precisely those meetings—especially those that have been held since the presidential campaigns got under way—that got Friends of Abe the media attention it has taken pains to avoid.

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— Evan Sayet, *Friends of Abe*

Under IRS Fire

Sources as well as FOA members confirm that along with job leads and commiseration, talk at regular meetings at restaurants and private homes often segues into politics. At the same time, Republican candidates for president and other conservative political leaders have often made a pilgrimage to Los Angeles for a speech to the FOA. Among those who have been hosted by the group are past presidential

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hopefuls Michelle Bachmann and Herman Cain, former Reps. John Boehner (when he was Speaker of the House) and Eric Cantor (when he was House majority leader), and current House Speaker Paul Ryan.

In addition, 2016 contenders Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Ben Carson, Carly Fiorina, and Mike Huckabee have been guest speakers at FOA, as have former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and former Vice President Dick Cheney.

Also featured as speakers at past FOA meetings have been conservative commentator and cable TV fixture Ann Coulter, radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, and Republican strategist Karl Rove. In August 2012, an FOA banquet featured the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia as guest speaker and entertainment was provided by country-western artist Larry Gatlin and comedian Dana Carvey.

In 2011, to make it easier to cover the costs of an office and the small staff that coordinates its events, FOA asked the Internal Revenue Service for 501(c)(3) status as a nonprofit corporation. In so doing, documentary film producer Jeremy Boreing, who succeeded Sinise as the group's leader, strongly emphasized that FOA does not have a political action committee and does not support candidates or engage in electoral politics in any way. The IRS then began extensive

scrutiny of the group, including a request for the confidential portion of the FOA website that included its membership list. When Boreing declined, the IRS remonstrated with repeated questions about the Friends' events and other activities.

Because this bureaucratic dispute arose amid revelations that the IRS was applying unduly harsh heightened scrutiny of requests for tax-exempt status from Tea Party groups and other conservative organizations, FOA's quest for IRS recognition caught the attention of Fox News' Megyn Kelly and her "Kelly File" show in January 2014.

"We understand through our attorneys that our agent at the IRS who was handling our file," Boreing charged, "specifically said we had been targeted on the BOLO [Be On the Lookout] list. So I think that probably the reason we're being targeted is we filed as a conservative educational fellowship."

He added that if Friends of Abe "were the local chapter of the Lions Club, we would protect the privacy of our members. People who join the organization are not seeking publicity. We're not advocating for anything. We're not trying to accomplish any objective politically or even from a Hollywood business point of view." Boreing had the weight of the Constitution on his side: The leading

Supreme Court case on this question is *NAACP v. Alabama* (1958), in which the high court ruled that racist Democrat officials in Alabama could not force the state's leading civil rights organization to hand over its membership list.

Also weighing in was past FOA speaker and 2016 presidential candidate Ted Cruz. In early 2014, Cruz told the *Hollywood Reporter* how the group ought to deal with the tax agency's demand for its membership lists: "FOA should respond to the IRS as it would any McCarthyite request for information."

On March 16, 2014, the IRS finally gave in and granted the fellowship of conservatives its 501(c)(3) status.

"We feel the outcome is the right outcome, but after three years, it is hard to be really enthusiastic. It is just a relief," Boreing told reporters. "There are a lot of other organizations that are probably in a similar situation."

To Be Continued . . .

On July 10, 2015, Friends of Abe spawned controversy and received publicity that in all likelihood it didn't want when it hosted a banquet at the Luxe Sunset Hotel in the tawny Bel Air neighborhood of Los Angeles.

The speaker: Donald Trump.

Coming not long after the presidential hopeful made his controversial remarks that the ranks of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. included “rapists” and “criminals,” news of the event evoked fury and condemnation throughout the predominantly liberal Hollywood community. “The secret organization of Hollywood right-wingers, Friends of Abe, doesn’t want anyone to know about its private big-money banquet this coming Friday night in honor of Mr. ‘Latino immigrants are rapists and criminals’ himself, Donald Trump,” a left-wing flier shrieked. “Yes, the racist GOP presidential candidate is getting a warm welcome from the Abes, but no one outside the incestuous little circle of Hollywood right-wingers is supposed to know about it.”

According to a statement from FOA to the ABC-TV Los Angeles affiliate, “We invited Mr. Trump for the same reason we invite all of our speakers: to give our members a chance to hear from movement conservatives without the filter of the media so they can reach their own conclusions.”

That was not good enough for professional illegal-alien apologists. As Jorge-Mario Cabrera, communications director at the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, told reporters two days before the candidate’s arrival: “We’re going to be having a piñata to show

how much of a caricature Mr. Trump has become.”

“There is a kind of intellectual terror in this town. People are terrorized; they’re afraid to say what they think.”

– *David Horowitz, David Horowitz Freedom Center*

As it turned out, Trump’s visit went off without incident. And as its organizers desired, it received little publicity.

As much as its leaders felt it must remain underground, its publicity grew rapidly, simply because of the attention that candidates such as Trump and prominent conservatives paid to it.

David Horowitz, well-known Los Angeles conservative and founder of the David Horowitz Freedom Center, may have put it best when he told reporters: “There is a kind of intellectual terror in this town. People are terrorized; they’re afraid to say what they think. So what [Sinise] is doing to provide aid and comfort to its victims is admirable, and I applaud him for it.

“But my concern is it’s not going to be much more than that.”

Evan Sayet sees it differently. As he put it, “Where I disagree with my friend David Horowitz is that being a ‘fellowship,’ we were never intended to ‘accomplish’ anything more than giving like-minded, freedom-loving working Hollywood conservatives a place to speak freely.

“What we then accomplished with our new friends and colleagues is not FOA but it was facilitated and made possible by our meeting and being able to speak freely about our ideas, our pet projects and other things we’d never be able to talk about—much less pitch and bring to fruition—in Hollywood.”

With the end of Friends of Abe, surely, in time, another group will take its place, as the lone refuge for conservatives in Hollywood.

John Gizzi is chief political columnist and White House correspondent for Newsmax.

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Scott Walter, President

Briefly Noted

The street thugs and economically illiterate crazies of the **George Soros**-funded **Occupy Wall Street** movement returned to New York City last month in a bid to help their hero, Sen. **Bernie Sanders** (I-Vt.), win the Empire State's critical Democratic Party presidential primary contest. "Bernie's campaign -- like the [**Bill de Blasio**] campaign [for New York mayor in 2013], like the [**Elizabeth Warren**] campaign [for U.S. Senate in Massachusetts in 2012] -- are lineal descendants of Occupy," said **Bob Master**, political director for the **Communications Workers of America** and co-chairman of the **ACORN**-affiliated **Working Families Party**. "These campaigns, and Sanders most dramatically, are Occupy Wall Street translated into electoral politics," Master told **CNN**. "This is the revolt of the 99 percent."

The Left continues to persecute **Planned Parenthood's** enemies who filmed undercover videos to document the taxpayer-funded abortion mill's unlawful trafficking in organs from aborted babies. The home of **Center for Medical Progress** founder **David Daleiden** was raided in an evidentiary fishing expedition by investigators working for California Attorney General **Kamala Harris** (D), whose campaign for her office was funded in part by Planned Parenthood. Daleiden said the officials "seized all video footage showing Planned Parenthood's criminal trade in aborted baby parts, in addition to my personal information." Describing Harris as "Planned Parenthood's bought-and-paid-for AG," he accused her of refusing even to consider investigating Planned Parenthood, "while at the same time doing their bidding to harass and intimidate citizen journalists."

Welcome murderers, rapists, and thieves as your tenants or you will face huge monetary penalties, the **Obama** administration said in a new threat aimed at the nation's landlords. Among convicted criminals, only drug dealers and drug manufacturers will be excluded from special protection under the administration's novel interpretation of housing law. "The fact that you were arrested shouldn't keep you from getting a job and it shouldn't keep you from renting a home," Obama's far-left Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, **Julian Castro**, told the annual meeting of the **National Low Income Housing Coalition** last month.

Several Islamic activist groups that took part in the **U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations'** 2nd Annual National Muslim Advocacy Day on Capitol Hill this April have close ties to the Egypt-based terrorist group known as the **Muslim Brotherhood**. Among the terrorist-linked groups pressing lawmakers last month were the **Muslim American Society** and the **Islamic Circle of North America**, "which openly states its goal of establishing a global caliphate and was listed in a May 1991 internal Muslim Brotherhood document that was later discovered by law enforcement officials," journalist **Robert Spencer** reports. The document, a blueprint for the Islamic conquest of this continent, identifies ICNA as an allied group and indicates that Brotherhood operatives in the U.S. "must understand that their work in America is a kind of grand Jihad in eliminating and destroying the Western civilization from within and 'sabotaging' its miserable house by their hands and the hands of the believers so that it is eliminated and God's religion is made victorious over all other religions."

The Heat Street website reports that this year's **Pulitzer Prize** awards "recognized a parade of journalists whose work was overtly hostile to law enforcement." The *Washington Post* snagged the national reporting award for "its revelatory initiative in creating and using a national database to illustrate how often and why the police shoot to kill and who the victims are most likely to be," in the words of the Pulitzer organization. **ProPublica** garnered an "explanatory reporting" award for a "startling examination and exposé of law enforcement's enduring failures to investigate reports of rape properly and to comprehend the traumatic effects on its victims." Heat Street editorialized, "We did not see awards for the kind of hard-nosed, fact-based reporting that calls establishment sacred cows into question, especially sacred cows who graze in Silicon Valley ... It's a lot easier to go after some low-paid cops and prison guards."