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## Confessions of a War Propagandist

By Jim Hale  
July 6, 2016

In explaining Donald Trump and the train wreck of the Republican Party, neoconservative contempt has targeted cultural rot, immigrant haters, and according to the the National Review, prescription drug addicted hillbillies. These poor, dumb racists have latched on to a celebrity shyster who has no conservative principles and worst of all, no understanding of international affairs.

No self-reflection is even considered by neoconservatives or their strongest pro-war allies, evangelical Christians. In 2002-2003 I was in the center of both groups during the buildup to the Iraq War, as the media relations director for the Committee of the Liberation of Iraq (CLI) and as an evangelical Christian active in small groups, community outreach, and engagement with other “gospel-centered” evangelicals who were earnestly seeking to share the gospel with a world that desperately needed to know God’s love and mercy.

It never occurred to me that there were any contradictions in being a war propagandist, a missional Christian, and a fierce opponent of big government. I reported for duty at the CLI office on Pennsylvania Avenue, scheduling interviews for my boss, Randy Scheunemann and other members of the Committee such as Christopher Hitchens, our left-wing pro-war star. I spoke to The Weekly Standard magazine editor Bill Kristol daily, who had conceived the CLI with Scheunemann and Bruce Jackson of Lockheed Corporation. Following a New York Times story announcing the formation of the CLI, the media frenzy never slowed.

Scheunemann was the public relations mastermind and one of the most influential behind the scenes operators in Washington during the winter of 2002-2003. Many of the talking points (“We will be greeted as liberators,” “Sadaam has used chemical weapons on his own people,” “Rogue state rollback”) came right out of our office. A former aide on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to Majority Leader Trent Lott, Scheunemann proudly displayed a signed letter and framed photograph from President Clinton on his office wall, thanking him for his drafting of the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, the stated goal of which was regime change. A frequent visitor to our office was Ahmad Chalabi, the American educated Iraqi dissident who provided much of the information that was passed directly to the Department of Defense and the White House through our office.

Scheunemann and I attended a meeting with a White House staffer at the Old Executive Office Building where we were assured that we operated with the blessing of the White House. Each day we recruited a Democrat or left-leaning opinion maker was cause for celebration. Of course it was bi-partisan with the likes of Democratic Senators such as Joseph Lieberman and Evan Bayh, as well as labor boss Jimmy Hoffa, former Senator Bob Kerrey along with reliable Republicans Newt Gingrich and John McCain, who later hired Scheunemann as his foreign policy advisor for his 2008 Presidential campaign.

Hitchens was all in, and our most frequently requested TV guest. He loved going against the antiwar liberals and told me on one occasion that he only wanted to do interviews where he had to take on at least two antiwar guests. In a live forum opposing William Galston at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Hitchens made a case for toppling Saddam in response to the killing of thousands of seals when Sadaam set fire to the oil fields during the Gulf War. “The mass slaughter of seals must be avenged!” By the time Galston stood up to read his paper, no one was listening.

Former Drug Czar turned military expert television commentator Barry McCaffrey stopped by one afternoon to prepare for an appearance on CNN as a CLI member. The man literally knew nothing about the current state of Iraq and he was going on national television masquerading as an expert.

We got what we wanted. Just five months into the CLI’s existence, the war was started and we awaited the inevitable welcome from the liberated Iraqis, who Bush kept reminding the world, yearned for “democracy.” Bush’s favorite line (which he regularly mangled) was lifted from Whittaker Chambers’ “Letter To My Children,” in the preface to his landmark book Witness:

the soul continually strives toward a condition of freedom...without freedom, the soul dies.

“Letter To My Children” was required reading at the neoconservative Institute of World Politics, where I was taking graduate courses while working for Scheunemann at Orion Strategies and the CLI. As a Reagan conservative who grew up in the Cold War, reading about Chambers’ conversion from communist spy to conservative hero was exhilarating. Working at the CLI was my opportunity to deal with the same kind of evil that Chambers confronted – an evil that, like communism, was totalitarian and hated everything about the United States. It didn’t matter that there was little evidence that Iraq had posed a terrorist threat to the United States, Sadaam was a

modern day Hitler who had “used chemical weapons against his own people” and could use them against us. He had to go, and I was more than happy to do my part in convincing others that regime change was morally justified.

I recall little discussion amongst fellow Christians concerning the morality of starting a war (although in later years I came across some Ron Paul Christian homeschoolers and conservative Catholics who were antiwar). Many evangelical Christians today are expressing justified outrage that Republicans have selected a barbarian who brags about having sex with married women and has never asked God for forgiveness, but few of us are ever compelled to question our fifteen year war in Afghanistan, the four thousand American military personnel on the ground in Iraq (who continue to be killed) effectively continuing a 13 year war, or the wisdom of attempting another regime change in Syria. Thoughtful conservative Christians preferred Ted Cruz, who assured us that carpet bombing was the solution.

When Donald Trump mentioned in the fall debates that he had always been against the Iraq War, and questioned whether the United States should remove Assad, my former neocon brethren chuckled, then were appalled when it became clear that plenty of Republican voters didn't care any more that a presidential candidate dared to challenge neocon orthodoxy. It was supposed to have been a major gaffe when Trump called Bush a liar during the South Carolina Primary debates, and reiterated his opposition to the Iraq War. Commentators on Fox News reminded us that South Carolina was Bush country and with it's large Navy base in Charleston, would make Trump pay. Trump crushed the competition in South Carolina, just as he did earlier in Virginia Beach, Virginia, home to the country's largest population of active Navy personnel.

The editors at National Review and The Weekly Standard haven't figured this out. Republican Representative Walter Jones, who has steadfastly opposed continued military presence in the Middle East and Afghanistan, recently fended off a well financed primary challenge of a handpicked neocon from the Bush administration. Jones' 3rd District of eastern North Carolina includes Camp Lejeune Marine Corp Base and he admits to “serving penance” when he has to write letters of condolence to survivors of the war dead. The Jones victory is a clear signal that our war veterans and their families are weary of the neoconservative war making apparatus and the inept justifications for more military interventions.

It's time evangelical Christians follow the example of Jones, a devoted Catholic, who publicly denounces his vote to approve the use of force in Iraq in 2003 every chance he gets. We have been nothing more than puppets for neoconservative Republicans who exploit our “support the troops” mentality in the same manner Democrats have exploited minorities.

We are outspoken critics of a big government that is killing us with taxes and regulations but we rarely speak out about the trillions of dollars being wasted in wars that will keep our children in debt for decades. Our prayers for the thousands of young men and women who we send to off to “fight for our freedoms,” many of whom return dead or dismembered, only serve to deceive ourselves.

If Christian conservatives truly want limited government, we can no longer blindly support big government military interventions and continue to elect war making politicians. We are part of

the problem. We have been used by neocon Republicans and we should stop blaming Donald Trump for dismantling the Republican Party.