Diary of an Ex-Neocon

[*Ex-Neocon: Dispatches From the Post 9/11 Ideological Wars*](http://amzn.to/2aZjQII)*, Scott McConnell, Algora Publishing, 264 pages*

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Review By [JUSTIN RAIMONDO](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/author/justin-raimondo) • [August 15, 2016](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/diary-of-an-ex-neocon/)



I am an inveterate reader of ex-communist memoirs—from Benjamin Gitlow’s *The Whole of Their Lives* to the more well-known *Witness*by Whittaker Chambers—for reasons that are uncomfortably akin to voyeurism. The prospect of entering a subterranean world known only to its inhabitants, with its obscure rituals and secret handshakes, is inherently thrilling to those of us with a taste for ideological hegiras told in the first person. And so I approached Scott McConnell’s *[Ex-Neocon](http://amzn.to/2aZjQII)* anticipating a juicy morsel indeed. After all, the neocons, unlike the communists, have left an indelible imprint on our contemporary world, as even a casual glance at the smoking ruins of the Middle East will confirm. And yet I found something quite different—and far more satisfying.

Not that there isn’t any inside gossip on the Secret Life of Neocons: we are told of a privately circulated purge letter by Irwin Stelzer, the Bronx-born economist and*Weekly Standard*contributing editor, who is described as “the ideological gendarme for Rupert Murdoch’s American media properties.” In 1995, offended by *National Review*’s failure to toe the neocon open-borders America-is-an-idea immigration policy, Stelzer announced he was canceling his subscription. The magazine, under then-editor John O’Sullivan, was engaging in “a not-very-subtle form of anti-Semitism”—because wanting to have borders that don’t resemble walls made of Swiss cheese is apparently the equivalent of promoting the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Bill Buckley, initially refusing to be bullied, eventually succumbed to this hectoring campaign, and by the late ’90s, O’Sullivan was out, Rich Lowry was in, and the neocon Central Committee was appeased. Next on the firing line—Scott McConnell himself.

As editorial page editor of the *New York Post*—the neocons’ mass-circulation *Pravda*—McConnell was all too familiar with the ideological nuances of that infamous sect, and the irritability of its leaders. But even he didn’t anticipate being sacked in 1997 for an editorial opposing statehood for Puerto Rico. Who knew that subsidizing a free-spending welfare state was a neocon article of faith? But his deviationism wasn’t limited to this: his unnamed boss pointed to a piece by soft-core immigration restrictionist Mark Krikorian and complained “You keep putting things in the paper like that.”

For all the neocons’ ostensible devotion to the canons of political correctness, however, it seems that in private it’s quite a different story: “It may not prove much of anything,” McConnell [confides](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/among-the-neocons/), “but a dinner with [paleoconservative-cum-white nationalist] Sam Francis (or virtually any other ‘paleocon’) is less tinged with snickers and winks about the behavior of people of color than a dinner in the New York neocon world.” Well, it does indeed prove that they’re hypocrites of the first order, but then again this comports perfectly with their Straussian esotericism.

McConnell’s wit, especially sharp when cutting up his former comrades, had me laughing out loud. Describing Fred Barnes’s*Rebel in Chief*, a hagiography of George W. Bush, [he writes](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/let-me-shine-your-shoes-sir/): “For readers who might wonder what it is like to be a North Korean and required to read formulaic biographies of great helmsman Kim Il Sung and his son, an afternoon spent with *Rebel in Chief* should provide a proximate answer.”

If the *New York Post* is their *Pravda*, then *The Weekly Standard* is the neocons’ [*Iskra*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iskra), where the ideological twists and turns of the Party Line are explicated at some length, and not without some elegance, as McConnell notes. The weekly’s key role in diverting the Bush administration into Iraq after the 9/11 attacks is here laid out in all its Machiavellian sinuosity. And the distinctly Soviet air of the Kristolian style is illustrated quite nicely by McConnell’s [description](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-weekly-standards-war/) of the magazine’s covers, a typical one being “George W. Bush, gesticulating before an audience of troops, arm extended in a Caesarian pose. ‘The Liberator,’ the *Standard* headline proclaimed. Flatter the leader who will do your bidding.”

Yet there is a bit more to the literature of the courtier than appears on the surface. Flatter the king, get close enough to whisper in his ear—and then, if necessary, bury the knife deep in his back. Barnes depicts Bush as the bold leader who defied “the crabbed views of experts. And lest we forget, it is Bush alone who has done this, not his advisors. The cynical might suspect that this last is a form of neoconservative special pleading, designed to spirit the war party intellectuals away from the scene when the Bush policy goes down in flames.” Which is precisely what happened, as McConnell chronicles in detail.

The damage this political cult has done to the American polity, and to the Middle East, cannot even be calculated: how much, after all, is a human life worth? What about hundreds of thousands of lives? Yet they never seem to be finally defeated: [as McConnell puts it](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/they-only-look-dead/), “if disrespecting the neoconservatives is emerging as a minor national sport, it should be enjoyed and tempered with realism.” Sure, “the last few years have been difficult for the faction,” but “they have other options.” As they stream back into the Democratic Party after being steamrollered by Donald Trump—Robert Kagan and Max Boot are shilling for Hillary, with more of their comrades soon to follow—the former Scoop Jackson Democrats have come full circle, their survival skills fully intact.

They “certainly won’t disappear in the way that American communism or segregation have,” [says McConnell](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/they-only-look-dead/), and one big reason is because “Perhaps most importantly neoconservatism still commands more salaries—able people who can pursue ideological politics as fulltime work in think tanks and periodicals—than its rivals.” Which means “the reports of the movement’s demise”—and I’ve authored a few of those—“are thus very much exaggerated.”

Well, yes, that’s unfortunately true. We’ve heard of the neocons’ demise so many times that the prospect has now become somewhat hopeless: they just keep reincarnating themselves in another form. But that shouldn’t stop us from hoping against hope.

In spite of this book’s title, there is much more to it than the storied history of the neocons as seen from inside the tent. There are sections on Israel, the run up to the Iraq war, President Obama, reflections on history, Russia and NATO, racial politics, and more. McConnell is at his best when he writes in the first person: a trip through Syria and Palestine, detailed in “[Divided and Conquered](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/divided-conquered/),” reveals a perception honed to the finest detail, and a sensitivity and compassion that invariably breaks through a reserved WASP-y persona. McConnell isn’t just an observer, with a keen eye for detail: he projects himself into these geopolitical conundrums, imbued with the sort of empathy that connects both himself and the reader to real human suffering, a quality that makes him a trenchant critic of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

That critique is laid out in a long essay, “[The Special Relationship With Israel: Is It Worth the Cost?](http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/special-relationship-israel)” in which the history and consequences of our protracted and expensive patronage of the Jewish state is analyzed and detailed in ways you haven’t seen or read before. McConnell likes the Israelis, supports their right to nationhood, and yet insists that we treat them as a normal country, not a pampered child who throws tantrums to get what it wants. He is measured, rational, compassionate, and, most of all, very well informed. We find out many things along the way, such as the real nature of the “good deal” that Yasser Arafat rejected, and rightly so.

At the end of a long “[Open Letter to David Horowitz on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](http://www.antiwar.com/mcconnell/mc011502.html),” in which the author takes apart the irascible pro-Israel fanatic’s argument that the Palestinians aren’t *really* a people and should just get lost, he writes; “David, I hope you know this letter is written in a spirit of friendly, even comradely, disagreement and that it comes from someone who has plenty of appreciation for everything you have done since you came out as a ‘Lefty for Reagan’ seventeen years ago, and who was an avid *Ramparts* reader a dozen years before that.”

For my part, he gives Horowitz far too much credit, but that’s an essential part of the author of *Ex-Neocon*: a gentleness that allows him to appreciate the talent and achievements of his ideological opposite numbers, even as he tears their arguments to shreds. His personality comes through in a way that is understated and yet strong. [Here he is in Virginia Beach](http://lobelog.com/on-the-trail-in-virginia/#more-14754), canvassing for Obama during the 2012 election, riding around with a bunch of female volunteers, two black and one white:

It was a curiously moving experience. … I have led most of my life not caring very much whether the poor voted, and indeed have sometimes been aware my interests aligned with them not voting at all. But that has changed. And so one knocks on one door after another in tiny houses and apartments in Chesapeake and Newport News, some of them nicely kept and clearly striving to make the best of a modest lot, others as close to the developing world as one gets in America. And at moments one feels a kind of calling—and then laughs at the Alinskian presumption of it all. Yes, we are all connected.

So what was this ex-neocon, former campaign manager for Pat Buchanan’s last presidential run, and former editor of *The American Conservative* doing canvassing for Barack Obama? You really have to read [this book](http://amzn.to/2aZjQII) to find out.

*Justin Raimondo is editorial director of Antiwar.com and the author of* [Reclaiming the American Right: The Lost Legacy of the Conservative Movement](https://www.amazon.com/Reclaiming-American-Right-Conservative-Movement/dp/1933859601/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1471234331&sr=1-1&keywords=Reclaiming+the+American+Right%3A+The+Lost+Legacy+of+the+Conservative+Movement.).