

Why I Left the Anti-War Right

By Anthony Gancarski

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If someone had told me a few months ago that I'd be writing a piece for *Front Page* on this theme, I would've dismissed him as a lunatic. After all, then I was supporting the positions expected from those on the so-called antiwar right. I was harshly critical of Israeli defense initiatives, more willing to talk up for Noam Chomsky than the sitting President, and insistent upon baiting "neo-conservative" Michael Ledeen of *National Review* into admitting that he sought to see the regime in Tehran overthrown by any means necessary, including US Military involvement.

I was as self-righteous in these positions as I was strident -- and why wouldn't I be? Principled opposition to aggressive, preemptive wars, to me, seemed a position of deepest honor and true conservative principle. I saw valor in it -- the same sort I attributed to Patrick Buchanan when he opposed Desert Storm from what I saw at the time as a conservative perspective. That position seemed eminently principled and legitimate, leading me to work for the Buchanan 1992 Primary campaign when I was nineteen years old.

Despite this political involvement, I saw myself as a "creative writer", and did what creative writers do. But on September 11, 2001 that changed. That day's events struck me as signaling the end of the American Century. My reaction was: the "chickens coming home to roost," and the ubiquitous flag imagery didn't stoke the patriotic fire in my heart. The heavy symbolism of the media culture seemed to me like a usurpation of love of country, independent thought, and other things I couldn't name. I looked around for people who saw things as I did.

It was then that I delved into the work of Chomsky, the folks at *CounterPunch*, Robert Fisk and scores of others who I saw as having dared to stand against America's reckless embrace of global "hegemony." So, more or less without meaning to, I went hard-left. This happened even though I take a dim view of socialism, even though I think wealth redistribution is a shell game and that legalized abortion is a front for mainstreaming eugenics, and despite finding utterly moronic the question "Why couldn't we listen to what our friends in the world are telling us what to do?"

I bought into the antiwar position of the neo-Communist left readily enough to write for *CounterPunch*. After a ridiculous email from Alexander Cockburn -- a man whom George Will said should be put into the Smithsonian as "the last Stalinist" -- which claimed the US budget deficit presented no obstacle to socialist wealth redistribution schemes, I moved over to Antiwar.com to write a weekly column for them at \$25 per pop. The lesson there: ideologues work cheap. That was a raise from my CounterPunch pay.

When writing for either site, I couldn't help but notice that a lot of the emails I got regarding my work fell into one of two categories: gushing, disjointed missives from one person or another pushing "anybody but Bush", and even more disjointed letters from opponents of Israel. Well, not just opponents of Israel -- but also of Jews themselves, and their "imperialist lackeys," et cetera. An emailer from Germany forced me to block him from my inbox when he asked me to help him "combat the Zionist devil empire." Along those lines, emails from Iran, Thailand, and Australia warned about the Jewish menace -- the same tired conspiracy theories and rationales that surface when people are trying to legitimize their anti-Semitism.

My work was getting linked to by people I wouldn't let into my living room. Raving pan-Arabists and

Indymedia hacks from four separate continents used my work to support their positions. US interview requests were scarce, but I was sought after by Muslim radio station hosts in South Africa for my wisdom. Always, it seemed, the world's problems were traced to the "war criminal" Ariel Sharon, while solutions turned out to be generalized support for the "Palestinian cause".

Rinse, repeat, ad nauseum; I began to have serious doubts about my work that I couldn't even verbalize. I started to wonder -- is my opposition to the US action in the Middle East, however noble and well-intentioned it seemed to me, actually playing into the hands of America's enemies, strategic adversaries, and economic competitors?

Such realizations gave me pause. But then I'd read another article about the Straussian noble lie, or another seeming fabrication of the "cabal" in Washington who drove us to war just for kicks, and my resolve came back. I played into the can-you-top-this? mentality common among polemicists of the political extremes in the US. But the self-satisfaction among those who opposed the war in Iraq (whether from the right or left) and trumpeted every piece of bad news about the Administration or US soldier movements -- as if missteps validated their position! -- began to strike me as misguided at best, and treasonous at worse. As those thoughts entered my mind while I filed my columns, my mailbox brimmed with dispatches trumpeting the efforts of the MoveOn.Org posse as the only rational redress for the Administration's historically unprecedented iniquities.

Against the backdrop of charmless mash notes from those who found John Ashcroft a greater menace than Saddam Hussein, I reread histories of the 20th century and noticed how massive the body counts were in the wars for freedom in Vietnam, Korea, Japan, and the European theatre. Compared to these, the Bush Administration's crusade to topple Saddam Hussein was a tea party. At the same time, the President's post 9/11/01 assertion that there was no middle ground -- "you're either with us or with the terrorists" -- took root in my heart against my will. For the first time since the atrocities of "September 11," I was no longer able to deny what I already knew.

Whatever could be said about what some on the political extremes call the "PNAC Axis," -- named after Bill Kristol's Project for the New American Century -- at least they understand the game America had to play for the foreseeable future. Attempting to create democracy in the Middle East can't be airily dismissed as an imperialist policy objective -- not when the security of the United States in an age of terror depends as much as it does on what goes on internally in Islamic countries, or on maintaining stable, reliable allies in the Persian Gulf, central Asia, and other volatile regions. Realizing that led me to an inconvenient conclusion: I had "outgrown" the position that had gotten me started writing about politics seriously in the first place.

I began to see certain initiatives of the antiwar right -- like the seemingly monthly coronations of Howard Dean as a viable, Presidential figure in such outlets as *The American Conservative* -- as beyond suspicious. Never mind that I had written articles that argued that Howard Dean wasn't "antiwar" in any meaningful sense, and that the paleos' embrace of New Left "liberal" was curious at best. What possible affinity did Mr. Culture Warrior Pat Buchanan have with Dean beyond a shared animus against their own government?

I couldn't imagine Pat Buchanan throwing his support to the man who made it a feature of his stump speech pandering to the LGBT community to say "I refuse to be divided by sexual orientation." Yet there Dean was, propped up by Buchanan's magazine as the Democratic Goldwater. Of course, Buchanan ran on the same ticket in 2000 with the Marxist-racist loon, Lenora Fulani -- equal parts Sister Souljah and Lyndon LaRouche -- so I really shouldn't have been surprised by the Dean gambit.

For the most part, however, I avoided public criticisms of the paleo-conservative courtship of Howard Dean. Though a freelance writer, I like to be a team player. But such constraints only went so far, and didn't stop my shock at a bomb that Antiwar.com Editorial Director Justin Raimondo threw in late November in his "Behind the Headlines" column. "Go Fuck Yourself, Mr. President," he wrote on November 26, 2003.

This set off a number of alarms. Who was Justin Raimondo? Why was he so lacking in respect for a sitting President? Did Raimondo even think how such a column might strike his own readers? I am still at a loss to understand it. When the column appeared, it was hard for me to read much of it without revulsion. Raimondo justified his attack by saying he was "sick of George W. Bush: sick of his petulant preppie voice, sick of his studied belligerence, and, most of all, damned sick of his threats. If we don't toe the line and support his crazed foreign policy of 'preemptive self-defense,' he constantly claims, we will reap the whirlwind."

Well, since you put it like that, Justin, one might ask why failure to support "preemptive self-defense" is a position without attendant risk? But Raimondo understands all too well that he's preaching to his own "Amen Corner." Raimondo doesn't hesitate to compare preemption to "totalitarian rule," to claim that every rationale for US involvement overseas is rooted in deception. At the same time, he chides the Administration for not going after Osama bin Laden! Unless Raimondo has taken a secret fact-finding trip to Afghanistan on his own, how would he know what the government is or is not doing to capture Osama? By reading Robert Fisk?

In many respects, Raimondo is the classic "armchair quarterback," his radicalism and "moral clarity" safeguarded by his physical remoteness from any of the real work being done in the War on Terror. Because he is a pathetic and frustrated onlooker, his style is pure rhodomantade: "The only proper answer to this is: *go fuck yourself, Mr. President*. You don't scare me one friggin' bit."

After reading the November 26 column, it became unavoidably clear to me that the stridency of the antiwar, isolationist right, rather than being morally superior to more mainstream brands of conservatism, was riddled with rhetorical excess, intellectual inconsistency, and even a moral laxness in certain respects. Even more importantly, there were areas in which the aims of the antiwar right diverged so markedly from America's national interest that one wondered to exactly what country some of them swore allegiance. Indeed, though praise for the Washington government was not to be found in even the most obscure corners of Antiwar.com and its sister site, LewRockwell.Com, on the other hand, one could readily find praise for the benign administration of Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

Still, despite crossover traffic from the *Southern Partisan* and Antiwar.Com's curiously intermittent links to articles on the website of the John Birch Society, unreconstructed States' Rights buffs were the least of Antiwar.Com's PR problems. A more immediate concern was the media play given one-time Antiwar.Com contributor Ismail Royer on his arrest in the beginning of this year.

Royer, author of Antiwar.Com's feature, "'Pro-Democracy' Think Tank Is Front for Israeli Lobby," was a key member of a Virginia *jihad* network who pled guilty to federal weapons and explosives charges in January. Royer sought to go to Kashmir with some pals to fight with what Raimondo calls an "obscure anti-Indian guerrilla group." Nothing controversial about that!

Raimondo was taken to task by Andrew Sullivan and Stephen Schwartz on FrontpageMag.com but wasted no time in disavowing any connection with the Virginia Jihadi. Airily, Raimondo debunked attempts by FrontPageMag.com columnists to connect him with Royer as a "grand conspiracy" forged

by residents of a “fantasy world” who would like nothing better than to see Royer and Raimondo sharing a prison cell for their dissidence, or their willingness to Speak Truth to Power.

But in the end, it wasn't Ismail Royer that hastened my departure from Antiwar.Com. It was the suspiciously overexposed Groucho-Leninist Michael Moore. Weeks ago, this hack of all trades wrote an essay pimping the familiar “Anybody But Bush” position that the “antiwar” campaign of 2003 had morphed into. Moore took a suspiciously nuanced position in his Antiwar.Com piece, “Dean Supporters, Don't Give Up.” Though he himself supports the Democratic primary candidacy of Wesley Clark because of the “manner” and “electability” of the General Bob Novak called “the Ultimate Perfumed Prince,” Moore saw the necessity in bolstering the spirits of Dean supporters disillusioned by the former Vermont Governor's \$40M tribute to Ed Muskie's '72 debacle.

As if channeling the indomitable spirit of “Comical Ali,” Saddam Hussein's former pitchman and media liaison, Moore urged Dean's cadre to continue undeterred: “You have done an incredible thing. You inspired an entire nation to stand up to George W. Bush. Your impact on this election will be felt for years to come. Every bit of energy you put into Dr. Dean's candidacy was -- and is -- worth it. He took on Bush when others wouldn't. He put corporate America on notice that he is coming after them. And he called the Democrats out for what they truly are: a bunch of spineless, wishy-washy appeasers... Everyone in every campaign owes you and your candidate a huge debt of thanks,” gushed Moore.

What a load of carnie bunk! In addressing Moore's baseless exhortations in what would've been an Antiwar.Com column entitled “Michael Moore: Roger, Over and Out,” I couldn't help but treat his claims with contempt. I mentioned that Lyndon LaRouche may have cause to sue Howard Dean for gimmick infringement, suggesting that Dean and Moore both were more products of a suspiciously well-funded cult/branding campaign than of legitimate political discourse. Such claims went too far for Editorial Director Raimondo, who described my column as a “compendium of literary and political no-no's.”

The word “no-no,” in itself, is an invitation to a fistfight, a word equal parts condescension and complacency. Here it set the tone for one of the most asinine emails I've ever received from an editor. Raimondo cautioned me that, “I certainly don't mind if you challenge our leftie readers to examine their own premises and prejudices: but we don't want to antagonize them.” Such antagonism, apparently, is reserved for supporters of the President and Israel.

Raimondo went on to explain What This Is All About. “We should be directing our fire at the Main Enemy, which is definitely NOT Michael Moore. There are so many truly evil acts that are being committed by our government -- and by phonies who dare call themselves “conservatives” -- that singling out Moore for special condemnation seems absurd.” Translation: you don't have a day pass to leave the reservation. Here's a quarter, kid, talk some smack about Richard Perle. He closed the note, saying that I had simply “dashed” my column off, so I certainly wouldn't mind if it never saw the light of day.

But I did mind. “Pretty much anyone working the Anyone But Bush angle is suspect at this point,” I wrote....W has an ugly job to do, and he does it as well as it can be done.”

I'd voiced these concerns to friends, but shied away from typing them until that email. As one came, another followed, tumbling like puppies from a litter. “Considering all the stuff that has been run on the site, to draw the line at me calling Michael Moore out for what he is [an opportunistic blowhard who acts as if the Iraqi invasion was 'elective'] just seems craven....”

And that was that. A parting of the ways with the antiwar Right. A coming to terms with politics as understood by everyone from Machiavelli to Nixon as a brutal scrum between brawlers who play to win, in which threats to national interest must be eliminated by whatever means necessary. And even though I'm giving up Raimondo's 25 bucks a week [a neat 1% of the \$10k required to keep Antiwar.Com going for just one month] and boundless license to pop off on neoconservatives every Friday, I feel I've gotten my credibility and my country back.