



## Neocons on a Cruise: What Conservatives Say When They Think We Aren't Listening

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I am standing waist-deep in the Pacific Ocean, both chilling and burning, indulging in the polite chit-chat beloved by vacationing Americans. A sweet elderly lady from Los Angeles is sitting on the rocks nearby, telling me dreamily about her son. "Is he your only child?" I ask. "Yes," she says. "Do you have a child back in England?" she asks. No, I say. Her face darkens. "You'd better start," she says. "The Muslims are breeding. Soon, they'll have the whole of Europe."

I am getting used to these moments - when gentle holiday geniality bleeds into... what? I lie on the beach with Hillary-Ann, a chatty, scatty 35-year-old Californian designer. As she explains the perils of Republican dating, my mind drifts, watching the gentle tide. When I hear her say, "Of course, we need to execute some of these people," I wake up. Who do we need to execute? She runs her fingers through the sand lazily. "A few of these prominent liberals who are trying to demoralise the country," she says. "Just take a couple of these anti-war people off to the gas chamber for treason to show, if you try to bring down America at a time of war, that's what you'll get." She squints at the sun and smiles. "Then things'll change."

I am travelling on a bright white cruise ship with two restaurants, five bars, a casino - and 500 readers of the National Review. Here, the Iraq war has been "an amazing success". Global warming is not happening. The solitary black person claims, "If the Ku Klux Klan supports equal rights, then God bless them." And I have nowhere to run.

From time to time, National Review - the bible of American conservatism - organises a cruise for its readers. I paid \$1,200 to join them. The rules I imposed on myself were simple: If any of the conservative cruisers asked who I was, I answered honestly, telling them I was a journalist. Mostly, I just tried to blend in - and find out what American conservatives say when they think the rest of us aren't listening.

### **From sweet to suicide bomber**

I arrive at the dockside in San Diego on Saturday afternoon and stare up at the Oosterdam, our home for the next seven days. Filipino boat hands are loading trunks into the hull and wealthy white folk are gliding onto its polished boards with pale sun parasols dangling off their arms.

The Reviewers have been told to gather for a cocktail reception on the Lido, near the very top of the ship. I arrive to find a tableau from *Gone With the Wind*, washed in a thousand shades of grey. Southern belles - aged and pinched - are flirting with old

conservative warriors. The etiquette here is different from anything I have ever seen. It takes me 15 minutes to realise what is wrong with this scene. There are no big hugs, no warm kisses. This is a place of starchy handshakes. Men approach each other with stiffened spines, puffed-out chests and crunching handshakes. Women are greeted with a single kiss on the cheek. Anything more would be French.

I adjust and stiffly greet the first man I see. He is a judge, with the craggy self-important charm that slowly consumes any judge. He is from Canada, he declares (a little more apologetically), and is the founding president of "Canadians Against Suicide Bombing". Would there be many members of "Canadians for Suicide Bombing?" I ask. Dismayed, he suggests that yes, there would.

A bell rings somewhere, and we are all beckoned to dinner. We have been assigned random seats, which will change each night. We will, the publicity pack promises, each dine with at least one National Review speaker during our trip.

To my left, I find a middle-aged Floridian with a neat beard. To my right are two elderly New Yorkers who look and sound like late-era Dorothy Parkers, minus the alcohol poisoning. They live on Park Avenue, they explain in precise Northern tones. "You must live near the UN building," the Floridian says to one of the New York ladies after the entree is served. Yes, she responds, shaking her head wearily. "They should suicide-bomb that place," he says. They all chuckle gently. How did that happen? How do you go from sweet to suicide-bomb in six seconds?

The conversation ebbs back to friendly chit-chat. So, you're a European, one of the Park Avenue ladies says, before offering witty commentaries on the cities she's visited. Her companion adds, "I went to Paris, and it was so lovely." Her face darkens: "But then you think - it's surrounded by Muslims." The first lady nods: "They're out there, and they're coming." Emboldened, the bearded Floridian wags a finger and says, "Down the line, we're not going to bail out the French again." He mimes picking up a phone and shouts into it, "I can't hear you, Jacques! What's that? The Muslims are doing what to you? I can't hear you!"

Now that this barrier has been broken - everyone agrees the Muslims are devouring the French, and everyone agrees it's funny - the usual suspects are quickly rounded up. Jimmy Carter is "almost a traitor". John McCain is "crazy" because of "all that torture". One of the Park Avenue ladies declares that she gets on her knees every day to "thank God for Fox News". As the wine reaches the Floridian, he announces, "This cruise is the best money I ever spent."

They rush through the Rush-list of liberals who hate America, who want her to fail, and I ask them - why are liberals like this? What's their motivation? They stutter to a halt and there is a long, puzzled silence. "It's a good question," one of them, Martha, says finally. I have asked them to peer into the minds of cartoons and they are suddenly, reluctantly confronted with the hollowness of their creation. "There have always been intellectuals who want to tell people how to live," Martha adds, to an almost visible sense of relief. That's it - the intellectuals! They are not like us. Dave changes the subject, to wash away this moment of cognitive dissonance. "The liberals don't believe in the constitution. They don't believe in what the founders wanted - a strong executive," he announces, to nods. A Filipino waiter offers him a

top-up of his wine, and he mock-whispers to me, "They all look the same! Can you tell them apart?" I stare out to sea. How long would it take me to drown?

**"We're doing an excellent job killing them."**

The Vista Lounge is a Vegas-style showroom, with glistening gold edges and the desperate optimism of an ageing Cha-Cha girl. Today, the scenery has been cleared away - "I always sit at the front in these shows to see if the girls are really pretty and on this ship they are ug-lee," I hear a Reviewer mutter - and our performers are the assorted purveyors of conservative show tunes, from Podhoretz to Steyn. The first of the trip's seminars is a discussion intended to exhume the conservative corpse and discover its cause of death on the black, black night of 7 November, 2006, when the treacherous Democrats took control of the US Congress.

There is something strange about this discussion, and it takes me a few moments to realise exactly what it is. All the tropes that conservatives usually deny in public - that Iraq is another Vietnam, that Bush is fighting a class war on behalf of the rich - are embraced on this shining ship in the middle of the ocean. Yes, they concede, we are fighting another Vietnam; and this time we won't let the weak-kneed liberals lose it. "It's customary to say we lost the Vietnam war, but who's 'we'?" the writer Dinesh D'Souza asks angrily. "The left won by demanding America's humiliation." On this ship, there are no Viet Cong, no three million dead. There is only liberal treachery. Yes, D'Souza says, in a swift shift to domestic politics, "of course" Republican politics is "about class. Republicans are the party of winners, Democrats are the party of losers."

The panel nods, but it doesn't want to stray from Iraq. Robert Bork, Ronald Reagan's one-time nominee to the Supreme Court, mumbles from beneath low-hanging jowls: "The coverage of this war is unbelievable. Even Fox News is unbelievable. You'd think we're the only ones dying. Enemy casualties aren't covered. We're doing an excellent job killing them."

Then, with a judder, the panel runs momentarily aground. Rich Lowry, the preppy, handsome 38-year-old editor of National Review, says, "The American public isn't concluding we're losing in Iraq for any irrational reason. They're looking at the cold, hard facts." The Vista Lounge is, as one, perplexed. Lowry continues, "I wish it was true that, because we're a superpower, we can't lose. But it's not."

No one argues with him. They just look away, in the same manner that people avoid glancing at a crazy person yelling at a bus stop. Then they return to hyperbole and accusations of treachery against people like their editor. The ageing historian Bernard Lewis - who was deputed to stiffen Dick Cheney's spine in the run-up to the war - declares, "The election in the US is being seen by [the bin Ladenists] as a victory on a par with the collapse of the Soviet Union. We should be prepared for whatever comes next." This is why the guests paid up to \$6,000. This is what they came for. They give him a wheezing, stooping ovation and break for coffee.

A fracture-line in the lumbering certainty of American conservatism is opening right before my eyes. Following the break, Norman Podhoretz and William Buckley - two of the grand old men of the Grand Old Party - begin to feud. Podhoretz will not stop

speaking - "I have lots of ex-friends on the left; it looks like I'm going to have some ex-friends on the right, too," he rants -and Buckley says to the chair, " Just take the mike, there's no other way." He says it with a smile, but with heavy eyes.

Podhoretz and Buckley now inhabit opposite poles of post-September 11 American conservatism, and they stare at wholly different Iraqs. Podhoretz is the Brooklyn-born, street-fighting kid who travelled through a long phase of left-liberalism to a pugilistic belief in America's power to redeem the world, one bomb at a time. Today, he is a bristling grey ball of aggression, here to declare that the Iraq war has been "an amazing success." He waves his fist and declaims: "There were WMD, and they were shipped to Syria ... This picture of a country in total chaos with no security is false. It has been a triumph. It couldn't have gone better." He wants more wars, and fast. He is "certain" Bush will bomb Iran, and " thank God" for that.

Buckley is an urbane old reactionary, drunk on doubts. He founded the National Review in 1955 - when conservatism was viewed in polite society as a mental affliction - and he has always been sceptical of appeals to " the people," preferring the eternal top-down certainties of Catholicism. He united with Podhoretz in mutual hatred of Godless Communism, but, slouching into his eighties, he possesses a world view that is ill-suited for the fight to bring democracy to the Muslim world. He was a ghostly presence on the cruise at first, appearing only briefly to shake a few hands. But now he has emerged, and he is fighting.

"Aren't you embarrassed by the absence of these weapons?" Buckley snaps at Podhoretz. He has just explained that he supported the war reluctantly, because Dick Cheney convinced him Saddam Hussein had WMD primed to be fired. "No," Podhoretz replies. "As I say, they were shipped to Syria. During Gulf War I, the entire Iraqi air force was hidden in the deserts in Iran." He says he is "heartbroken" by this " rise of defeatism on the right." He adds, apropos of nothing, "There was nobody better than Don Rumsfeld. This defeatist talk only contributes to the impression we are losing, when I think we're winning." The audience cheers Podhoretz. The nuanced doubts of Bill Buckley leave them confused. Doesn't he sound like the liberal media? Later, over dinner, a tablemate from Denver calls Buckley "a coward". His wife nods and says, " Buckley's an old man," tapping her head with her finger to suggest dementia.

I decide to track down Buckley and Podhoretz separately and ask them for interviews. Buckley is sitting forlornly in his cabin, scribbling in a notebook. In 2005, at an event celebrating National Review's 50th birthday, President Bush described today's American conservatives as "Bill's children". I ask him if he feels like a parent whose kids grew up to be serial killers. He smiles slightly, and his blue eyes appear to twinkle. Then he sighs, "The answer is no. Because what animated the conservative core for 40 years was the Soviet menace, plus the rise of dogmatic socialism. That's pretty well gone."

This does not feel like an optimistic defence of his brood, but it's a theme he returns to repeatedly: the great battles of his life are already won. Still, he ruminates over what his old friend Ronald Reagan would have made of Iraq. "I think the prudent Reagan would have figured here, and the prudent Reagan would have shunned a commitment of the kind that we are now engaged in... I think he would have

attempted to find some sort of assurance that any exposure by the United States would be exposure to a challenge the dimensions of which we could predict." Lest liberals be too eager to adopt the Gipper as one of their own, Buckley agrees approvingly that Reagan's approach would have been to "find a local strongman" to rule Iraq.

A few floors away, Podhoretz tells me he is losing his voice, "which will make some people very happy". Then he croaks out the standard-issue Wolfowitz line about how, after September 11, the United States had to introduce democracy to the Middle East in order to change the political culture that produced the mass murderers. For somebody who declares democracy to be his goal, he is remarkably blasé about the fact that 80 per cent of Iraqis want US troops to leave their country, according to the latest polls. "I don't much care," he says, batting the question away. He goes on to insist that "nobody was tortured in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo" and that Bush is "a hero". He is, like most people on this cruise, certain the administration will attack Iran.

Podhoretz excitedly talks himself into a beautiful web of words, vindicating his every position. He fumes at Buckley, George Will and the other apostate conservatives who refuse to see sense. He announces victory. And for a moment, here in the Mexican breeze, it is as though a thousand miles away Baghdad is not bleeding. He starts hacking and coughing painfully. I offer to go to the ship infirmary and get him some throat sweets, and - locked in eternal fighter-mode - he looks thrown, as though this is an especially cunning punch. Is this random act of kindness designed to imbalance him? "I'm fine," he says, glancing contemptuously at the Bill Buckley book I am carrying. "I'll keep on shouting through the soreness."

### **The Ghosts of Conservatism Past**

The ghosts of Conservatism past are wandering this ship. From the pool, I see John O'Sullivan, a former adviser to Margaret Thatcher. And one morning on the deck I discover Kenneth Starr, looking like he has stepped out of a long-forgotten 1990s news bulletin waving Monica's stained blue dress. His face is round and unlined, like an immense, contented baby. As I stare at him, all my repressed bewilderment rises, and I ask - Mr Starr, do you feel ashamed that, as Osama bin Laden plotted to murder American citizens, you brought the American government to a stand-still over a few consensual blow jobs? Do you ever lie awake at night wondering if a few more memos on national security would have reached the President's desk if he wasn't spending half his time dealing with your sexual McCarthyism?

He smiles through his teeth and - in his soft somnambulant voice - says in perfect legalese, "I am entirely at rest with the process. The House of Representatives worked its will, the Senate worked its will, the Chief Justice of the United States presided. The constitutional process worked admirably."

It's an oddly meek defence, and the more I challenge him, the more legalistic he becomes. Every answer is a variant on "it's not my fault" . First, he says Clinton should have settled early on in Jones vs Clinton. Then he blames Jimmy Carter. "This critique really should be addressed to the now-departed, moribund independent counsel provisions. The Ethics and Government [provisions] ushered in

during President Carter's administration has an extraordinarily low threshold for launching a special prosecutor..."

Enough - I see another, more intriguing ghost. Ward Connerly is the only black person in the National Review posse, a 67-year-old Louisiana-born businessman, best known for leading conservative campaigns against affirmative action for black people. Earlier, I heard him saying the Republican Party has been "too preoccupied with... not ticking off the blacks", and a cooing white couple wandered away smiling, "If he can say it, we can say it." What must it be like to be a black man shilling for a magazine that declared at the height of the civil rights movement that black people "tend to revert to savagery", and should be given the vote only "when they stop eating each other"?

I drag him into the bar, where he declines alcohol. He tells me plainly about his childhood - his mother died when he was four, and he was raised by his grandparents - but he never really becomes animated until I ask him if it is true he once said, "If the KKK supports equal rights, then God bless them." He leans forward, his palms open. There are, he says, "those who condemn the Klan based on their past without seeing the human side of it, because they don't want to be in the wrong, politically correct camp, you know... Members of the Ku Klux Klan are human beings, American citizens - they go to a place to eat, nobody asks them 'Are you a Klansmember?', before we serve you here. They go to buy groceries, nobody asks, 'Are you a Klansmember?' They go to vote for Governor, nobody asks 'Do you know that that person is a Klansmember?' Only in the context of race do they ask that. And I'm supposed to instantly say, 'Oh my God, they are Klansmen? Geez, I don't want their support.'"

This empathy for Klansmen first bubbled into the public domain this year when Connerly was leading an anti-affirmative action campaign in Michigan. The KKK came out in support of him - and he didn't decline it. I ask if he really thinks it is possible the KKK made this move because they have become converted to the cause of racial equality. "I think that the reasoning that a Klan member goes through is - blacks are getting benefits that I'm not getting. It's reverse discrimination. To me it's all discrimination. But the Klansmen is going through the reasoning that this is benefiting blacks, they are getting things that I don't get... A white man doesn't have a chance in this country."

He becomes incredibly impassioned imagining how they feel, ventriloquising them with a shaking fist - "The Mexicans are getting these benefits, the coloureds or niggers, whatever they are saying, are getting these benefits, and I as a white man am losing my country."

But when I ask him to empathise with the black victims of Hurricane Katrina, he offers none of this vim. No, all Katrina showed was "the dysfunctionality that is evident in many black neighbourhoods," he says flatly, and that has to be "tackled by black people, not the government." Ward, do you ever worry you are siding with people who would have denied you a vote - or would hang you by a rope from a tree?

"I don't gather strength from what others think - no at all," he says. "Whether they

are in favour or opposed. I can walk down these halls and, say, a hundred people say, 'Oh we just adore you', and I'll be polite and I'll say 'thank you', but it doesn't register or have any effect on me." There is a gaggle of Reviewers waiting to tell him how refreshing it is to "finally" hear a black person "speaking like this". I leave him to their white, white garlands.

**"You're going to get fascists rising up, aren't you? Why hasn't that happened already?"**

The nautical counter-revolution has docked in the perfectly-yellow sands of Puerto Vallarta in Mexico, and the Reviewers are clambering overboard into the Latino world they want to wall off behind a thousand-mile fence. They carry notebooks from the scribbles they made during the seminar teaching them "How To Shop in Mexico". Over breakfast, I forgot myself and said I was considering setting out to find a local street kid who would show me round the barrios - the real Mexico. They gaped. "Do you want to die?" one asked.

The Reviewers confine their Mexican jaunt to covered markets and walled-off private fortresses like the private Nikki Beach. Here, as ever, they want Mexico to be a dispenser of cheap consumer goods and lush sands - not a place populated by (uck) Mexicans. Dinesh D'Souza announced as we entered Mexican seas what he calls "D'Souza's law of immigration": "The quality of an immigrant is inversely proportional to the distance travelled to get to the United States."

In other words: Latinos suck.

I return for dinner with my special National Review guest: Kate O'Beirne. She's an impossibly tall blonde with the voice of a 1930s screwball star and the arguments of a 1890s Victorian patriarch. She inveighs against feminism and "women who make the world worse" in quick quips.

As I enter the onboard restaurant she is sitting among adoring Reviewers with her husband Jim, who announces that he is Donald Rumsfeld's personnel director. "People keep asking what I'm doing here, with him being fired and all," he says. "But the cruise has been arranged for a long time."

The familiar routine of the dinners - first the getting-to-know-you chit-chat, then some light conversational fascism - is accelerating. Tonight there is explicit praise for a fascist dictator before the entree has arrived. I drop into the conversation the news that there are moves in Germany to have Donald Rumsfeld extradited to face torture charges.

A red-faced man who looks like an egg with a moustache glued on grumbles, "If the Germans think they can take responsibility for the world, I don't care about German courts. Bomb them." I begin to witter on about the Pinochet precedent, and Kate snaps, "Treating Don Rumsfeld like Pinochet is disgusting." Egg Man pounds his fist on the table: "Treating Pinochet like that is disgusting. Pinochet is a hero. He saved Chile."

"Exactly," adds Jim. "And he privatised social security."

The table nods solemnly and then they march into the conversation - the billion-strong swarm of swarthy Muslims who are poised to take over the world. Jim leans forward and says, "When I see these football supporters from England, I think - these guys aren't going to be told by PC elites to be nice to Muslims. You're going to get fascists rising up, aren't you? Why isn't that happening already?" Before I can answer, he is conquering the Middle East from his table, from behind a crème brûlée.

"The civilised countries should invade all the oil-owning places in the Middle East and run them properly. We won't take the money ourselves, but we'll manage it so the money isn't going to terrorists."

The idea that Europe is being "taken over" by Muslims is the unifying theme of this cruise. Some people go on singles cruises. Some go on ballroom dancing cruises. This is the "The Muslims Are Coming" cruise - drinks included. Because everyone thinks it. Everyone knows it. Everyone dreams it. And the man responsible is sitting only a few tables down: Mark Steyn.

He is wearing sunglasses on top of his head and a bright, bright shirt that fits the image of the disk jockey he once was. Sitting in this sea of grey, it has an odd effect - he looks like a pimp inexplicably hanging out with the apostles of colostomy conservatism.

Steyn's thesis in his new book, *America Alone*, is simple: The "European races" i.e., white people - "are too self-absorbed to breed," but the Muslims are multiplying quickly. The inevitable result will be "large-scale evacuation operations circa 2015" as Europe is ceded to al Qaeda and "Greater France remorselessly evolve[s] into Greater Bosnia."

He offers a light smearing of dubious demographic figures - he needs to turn 20 million European Muslims into more than 150 million in nine years, which is a lot of humping.

But facts, figures, and doubt are not on the itinerary of this cruise. With one or two exceptions, the passengers discuss "the Muslims" as a homogenous, sharia-seeking block - already with near-total control of Europe. Over the week, I am asked nine times - I counted - when I am fleeing Europe's encroaching Muslim population for the safety of the United States of America.

At one of the seminars, a panelist says anti-Americanism comes from both directions in a grasping pincer movement - "The Muslims condemn us for being decadent; the Europeans condemn us for not being decadent enough." Midge Decter, Norman Podhoretz's wife, yells, "The Muslims are right, the Europeans are wrong!" And, instantly, Jay Nordlinger, *National Review's* managing editor and the panel's chair, says, "I'm afraid a lot of the Europeans are Muslim, Midge."

The audience cheers. Somebody shouts, "You tell 'em, Jay!" He tells 'em. Decter tells 'em. Steyn tells 'em.

On this cruise, everyone tells 'em - and, thanks to my European passport, tells me.

### **From cruise to cruise missiles?**

I am back in the docks of San Diego watching these tireless champions of the overdog filter past and say their starchy, formal goodbyes. As Bernard Lewis disappears onto the horizon, I wonder about the connections between this cruise and the cruise missiles fired half a world away.

I spot the old lady from the sea looking for her suitcase, and stop to tell her I may have found a solution to her political worries about both Muslims and stem-cells.

"Couldn't they just do experiments on Muslim stem-cells?" I ask. "Hey - that's a great idea!" she laughs, and vanishes. Hillary-Ann stops to say she is definitely going on the next National Review cruise, to Alaska. "Perfect!" I yell, finally losing my mind.

"You can drill it as you go!" She puts her arms around me and says very sweetly, "We need you on every cruise."

As I turn my back on the ship for the last time, the Judge I met on my first night places his arm affectionately on my shoulder. "We have written off Britain to the Muslims," he says. "Come to America."

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