



## Episode 727: Ex-Neocon: A Refugee from Neoconservatism on His Departure

Guest: Scott McConnell

**WOODS:** As soon as I found out you had a book called *Ex-Neocon* I thought, well, look, this is a natural. This thing's a definite. So I was glad to get it. And I was actually sitting in a bar the other day, not drinking alcohol, and I had a lot of time on my hands, so I sat down and read this thing. I thought I'll skim it and find some good items in here. And I just couldn't. I couldn't do anything other than read the whole thing. I just couldn't. I was just drawn into it. And I emailed you from there and said – well, I'll just put it this way: I said, doggone it, you are a good writer. I mean, it really, totally drew me in. Because it is a collection of essays, but they cohere around a them, and of course the them is "ex-neocon." I love the fact that there's no subtitle. It's just totally in your face. *Ex-Neocon*, period. Even though the publishing world is enamored of subtitles, you don't even give them one.

All right, so you have a title like that, you're going to have to answer this question: how did you become an ex-neocon? In fact, let's start with how'd you become a neocon to start with?

**MCCONNELL:** Yeah, that's the thing, because when I was a young person in the late '60s, early '70s, I was kind of a Gene McCarthy, Bobby Kennedy, you know, McGovern, antiwar Democrat, and my parents were left of center. And then I became anti-communist in the mid '70s. I had actually spent a year in Vietnam, but I became by the mid '70s increasingly anti-communist. And I began reading *Commentary*, and you know the odd op-ed piece in *The Times* by Midge Decter, and it very much spoke to me. And I also had professors at Columbia who were sort of of the anti-communist, social democrat generation Europeans, and they were the most impressive intellectuals I had come across, impressive men.

So you know, I worked for Carter, but by 1980 I voted for Reagan and began writing for *Commentary* in the early '80s when I was working on my dissertation. And it was a thrill to get published there. And you know, I liked their foreign policy views, and their views on domestic politics appealed to me too. I mean, they seemed to me suitably right wing without being kind of quirky or eccentric – like tough-minded but not, you know, George Wallacites or something like that. And I was a New Yorker, and probably the Jewish cultural aspect of the neocons was kind of more appealing to me than my own group of sort of desiccated WASPs. So you know, for those reasons. So for most of

my young manhood, you know, I got a job eventually at *The New York Post*, I worked for a while for Irving Kristol's *National Interest*, and I identified completely with them.

So how did I become ex? Well —

**WOODS:** Actually, before you go on, it's occurring to me that I've had a lot of people start listening to the show only recently, and I don't want to assume everybody knows what the term neocon means. We all use it and we assume everybody knows what it means, but how would you define it?

**MCCONNELL:** Well, it's an intellectual group of people who used to be ex-Democrats, and sometimes before that, you know, generations ago, they were on the further Left. Mostly urbanites, I would say half or more Jewish in their inception, who left the Democratic Party kind of out of feeling the Democrats had gone Left out in the 60s, and they migrated to the Republican Party into the conservative movement. And they became increasingly influential within the conservative movement. And then bit by bit they began pushing people out, or marginalizing other people in the conservative movement, so that they now pretty much hold hegemonic positions in the major think-tanks and magazines and stuff of the Republican Party. But this was a long and slow process.

But it wasn't — like William Kristol, who's editor of an important magazine, *The Weekly Standard*, is the son of Irving Kristol and John Podhoretz, who's the editor of *Commentary*, is the son of Norman Podhoretz. And Irving and Norman Podhoretz used to be — well, I mean, Kristol's been a Republican for a long time, but they used to be Democrats, and then they became Republicans and conservatives. And then they became the major tastemakers of conservatism.

**WOODS:** Well, I get the sense from your book that you hold Norman, even now, in higher regard than you do John.

**MCCONNELL:** Well, sure. I mean, everybody does. Norman is, you know —

**WOODS:** And Irving versus Bill, likewise.

**MCCONNELL:** Yes, yes. I mean, they're kind of really top level intellectual battlers. They're from modest backgrounds. They're smart. They're energetic. They never got bored with their work. And I mean, you know, sons of successful people are seldom — usually do not rise to the level of their fathers. And I mean, Bill Kristol is a kind of talented, smart, political entrepreneur. John Podhoretz would have a very average career were he not Norman's son, don't you think?

**WOODS:** Yeah, I don't think there's any question about either of these things, and especially, my gosh, that track record that Bill Kristol has on being so overwhelming — I mean, it's not an urban legend that he's just overwhelmingly consistently wrong about really important things, and I do want to get to the chapter in your book about *The Weekly Standard's* war. I mean, that really was a chilling essay, to me. But let's go

back. So what gives you second thoughts? What is there in the neoconservative message, the specifically neoconservative one that makes you think I'm not so sure I belong among this group anymore?

**MCCONNELL:** Well, there were two issues. I mean, some time in the '90s I found that I was increasingly sympathetic to the "it's time for the United States to slow down immigration" essays, which began being published in *National Review* when it was edited by John O'Sullivan and stuff like that, and I learned a lot about immigration, and I thought, you know, I'm not a nativist or a xenophobe, but we could have a kind of a nice slow down or pause and assimilate this big dose of new immigrants that has come over from the '70s and the '90s. And the neocons were really, really not amused. I mean, and they were actively hostile to – I mean, to a surprising degree, a shocking degree, they fought to marginalize people who thought that we should slow down immigration, trying to get them fired from their jobs, literally, in many important cases, including O'Sullivan's.

And it seemed so odd to me, because they were quick to wield out left-wing terms, like racist, bigot, and xenophobe, and they were also at the same time passionate supporters of Israel, and it never occurred to anyone to say, well, you support exactly the kind of ethnic solidarity for Israel very passionately that you oppose for the United States. Why is that? So it would be kind of hostile to say that to people who're your friends and colleagues, so you don't say it, but eventually it comes out. And of course it – so by 2000 I worked from Pat Buchanan's campaign, and Buchanan had been a kind of early opponent of the neocons, a premature anti-neoconservative. And that pretty much ended my association with neoconservatives.

And then when after 9/11 it was clear to all Buchananites and a few other people that the neocons were going to try to use America's kind of anger and desire for revenge and need to strike back at somebody to pursue their own agenda, which was like taking out a lot of Middle Eastern states, which they did, and that's where the Iraq War came from, one of the big reasons, the big contribution factors of the Iraq War.

**WOODS:** Well, let's take Pat Buchanan for a minute, because Pat had been, just by coincidence had been in the neocons' corner on the subject of the Cold War, and he very much defended Israel, because the Soviets were on the side of the Arab states by that point, so you had to defend Israel. And he supported Nixon to the hilt in '73 and all that. So what happened to make somebody like Pat and somebody like you look at the US-Israel relationship again and say, wait a minute; it's not really clear how the US benefits from this, and it's not clear that, frankly, whether the US benefits from it, is the issue the neocons are concerned about. Yes, I dare say that, that maybe that's not the top priority they have in this relationship.

**MCCONNELL:** (laughing) Well, Israel was a much more – you could make the case for it being a useful ally during the Cold War, as a sort of advanced military state that was on America's side. Once the Cold War was over, then the fact that Israel was occupying land that it had no right to and it was oppressing the original people there, the Palestinians, you know, just rises in importance, and I think a lot of people began to

notice that in the 1980s, maybe with Israel's invasion of Lebanon or the First Intifada, the Palestinian civil uprisings in the late '80s.

And Pat was one of those who began noticing in the late '80s, and I think he began saying there really should be a Palestinian state, which is something that American diplomats or any Mideast experts have long said, but which conservative commentators did not. So he was, as in so many cases, like early on with kind of a courageous position. So maybe for that reason — Pat was also an early opponent of the first Iraq War, which I, though I had my doubts about it, was not. But Buchanan is I think a major trailbreaker for a lot of other people. I mean, he was 10, 15 years ahead of me on all these questions, but I eventually moved in his direction.

**WOODS:** All right, what do you say to people who say Israel is fighting the same battle we are? That regardless of whether you like the way Israel was founded, whether you like the way the refugees were dealt with, that's all water under the bridge. Today they are fighting off the same kind of people who want to come here and do us harm, so put aside all your difficulties or the kind of arguments the State Department made in the old days. Forget it. That's from another world. Right now you have to decide are you on the side of civilization, or are you on the side of the savages. That's how the neocons would put it. How do you answer that?

**MCCONNELL:** No, I think that's a very interesting thing to parse, because — and I have to admit in the last few years it's hard to care as much about Israel-Palestine when there's so much else going on in the Mideast that is terrible, and also there's a problem with violent Islamic fundamentalism, which is terrible, which is savage, as you say. So I would say a couple things. First, Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people — Palestinians are not like the most radical Muslims around. I mean, the Palestinians as a people had a big Christian population and still have a large Christian population, and a big secular Muslim population. I mean, Israel wasn't fighting them because they were radical Muslims; they were fighting them because they were people who happened to live on the land that Israel wanted.

Secondly, Israel, in terms of its actual policies, is not really interested in fighting radical Islam. They are very much against Iran, which is not a radical Islamic state. It's a different strand of Muslim. And they're very much against Assad, who's not any kind of radical Muslim. And I think there's even been various Israeli commentators and generals who say, you know, what's the problem with ISIS. Why is that a problem for us? And in fact, ISIS is kind of good for Israel, because it makes the point that's in your question, that is Israel against the savages. But Israel doesn't have — Israel has a different strategic situation than the United States, and I think the worse the better is the way Israel views the Islamic wars and the more internal tensions and stuff, which there certainly are now. I mean, there's no Arab state that is any threat to Israel at all right now.

**WOODS:** Now, I don't want to focus entirely on the Israel and Palestinians question, but when you say thing like "Israeli oppression of the Palestinians," I feel like you do have to justify that. So when somebody says that, there is the response that, look,

the Palestinians have more representation in the Israeli government than Arabs anywhere in the Arab world have in their governments, and you have a much more open society, and this and that. And so what are they complaining about? Let's be reasonable here. Israel is the most civilized country in the region. It's the best quality of life these people can hope to get. Now, I'm not talking about — I'm talking about within Israel proper.

**MCCONNELL:** Yes.

**WOODS:** So what do you say to that?

**MCCONNELL:** I think there's some validity to that point within Israel proper, in that Israelis of Palestinian origin have a certain amount of civic rights in Israel proper. And I'd say their situation is probably better than that of American blacks in the '40s and '50, but it's certainly not equality in terms of — the Palestinian politicians who are in the Knesset are sort of like a world apart. They don't make coalitions with other parties, and the other parties would not make coalitions with them. So there's something kind of formal and meaningless about their ability to dissent. But their situation is not terrible.

The thing is is that most of the population does not live in Israel proper. Most of it is either in the Gaza Strip, which is under an extreme blockade, or in the West Bank, which is simply occupied territory, where the people have really no political rights at all and no right to, like, build a house without going through essentially Israeli government control, and Israel takes their land or takes parts of their land kind of at will. So if you're talking about — yes, the 15% of the Palestinian population — or I think that's a rough figure — in Israel proper has a certain degree of the civil rights that Israelis have, and that's a good thing.

You know, the radical position on the Israeli-Palestinian position, which I don't actually have, is that there should be one democratic state for all of Israel and Palestine, which I don't think this is a very viable shot, but it's that, all right, let's have Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank and Gaza all live in one state and all have the same civil rights. But I don't think that's — it's not likely to happen. But that is a possibility, I suppose. The one-state solution, it's called.

**WOODS:** I have a friend, who — I mean, he is a friend, and he's a Zionist. I know a lot of people who are Zionists. But this friend came out and said to me, look, these people are the consummate savages. How can you possibly have sympathy for them? And that was just the way he put it. It was just that way. And it's a person a lot of my listeners like very much. And he just said, these people are savages. How can you not see that? Why would your sympathies possibly be with them? That was his response. Now, is that something you encountered in neoconservative circles?

**MCCONNELL:** Well, not quite in those bald terms, but you did encounter, like — I mean, somebody told me that Norman Podhoretz had a sort of semi-private dinner — or made a joke that Israel or someone should bomb the Aswan Dam, even if it resulted

in millions and millions of deaths, which you wouldn't necessarily joke about killing millions and millions of any other people. And the neoconservatives know that the Palestinians are not savages. I mean, the neoconservatives want Palestinian land, but they know that the Palestinians were probably a more secular, advanced, bourgeois Mideast people than, say, Saudi Arabians or something like that. But Israel wants Palestinians' land, so whatever is useful to say about them they will say, whether they believe it or not.

**WOODS:** All right, I want to talk about recent, semi-recent, let's say, endeavors, but first let's thank our sponsor.

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Let's talk about *The American Conservative* magazine, which you had a hand in from the beginning. That was a self-consciously anti-neocon project. So tell me what was going through your head and how you were brought on board for that.

**MCCONNELL:** Okay. It was clear to me when working in the 2000 Buchanan campaign, where I worked as an aide to Pat and a drafter of some speeches and general muckety-muck, that there were a lot of intellectuals who were conservative and not necessarily represented in the media market. I mean, there was — and didn't have access to a lot of places to publish. I mean, there was *Chronicles*, which is a good magazine, but I thought there was perhaps space for something that was more linked to policy, maybe. I mean, I almost forget the right way to describe the difference of how I've described *Chronicles* and *TAC*.

Second then I was friends with Taki Theodoracopulos, and I know he wanted to do some kind of publishing project, and we had talked about he would invest some money and I would do some work with *New York Press*, but that didn't work out. And then I said, well — and I didn't really have any great idea how Taki could start a magazine by himself, but I said, look, why don't we — I know Pat; I know Taki. We could start a magazine together that would — and all these questions were coming up — in the year before the Iraq War it was sort of clear that there was a big push towards war. And there were a fair number of conservative intellectuals who were just skeptical about this and knew — and so between — so anyway, I introduced Pat and Taki and we came to an arrangement about joint ownership of the magazine, and we got it started.

And the niche was that at a time when all the conservatives in the country were gung-ho about invading a country that had nothing to do with 9/11 there would be a voice saying no. And as the ridiculousness of George W. Bush's Iraq policy became clear, that voice would grow from something very small to something more significant and more respected.

**WOODS:** Well, now there's real turmoil on the Right. There's complete upheaval with Donald Trump at the center of it, but it's more than that really. Even if there hadn't been — Donald Trump is a symptom of something deeper.

**MCCONNELL:** Yes.

**WOODS:** And Donald Trump is not really, as we can all see, very ideologically clear, I think even in his own mind. I think he has some basic sense of where he stands, but he's certainly not a — he's not a Scott McConnell, and he's not a Tom Woods in that sense. But there is a group that has arisen recently, and I think you know what I'm talking about: the so-called alt-right. These people are not quite the same, although there's an overlap in a Venn diagram between them and the paleoconservatives. They really are an entity unto themselves, and I know I need to do at least one episode on them — and I just don't care what people say anymore. I have enough listeners that I just don't — it doesn't matter to me. If I cover a sensitive subject, and somebody's too much of a snowflake to listen anymore, then go. This was not the podcast for you to start with if I can't talk about interesting subjects. So I know I've got to do a whole show on that, but I'm curious to know your thoughts about this group known as the alt-right.

**MCCONNELL:** Yeah, I know some of the people involved, and the person who's credited with coining the term, I don't know correctly or not, Richard Spencer, was for six months an assistant editor of *TAC* about nine years ago. And I recently was interviewed by *Mother Jones* about him, and it's true, we let Richard go, because despite the fact of there being a Venn diagram, I think he was going in a different direction. The alt-right, I guess, puts white identity front and center to a degree which just seems — you know, it's just not me, and it's not most of the writers at *TAC* — and it's not Pat Buchanan particularly for that matter either. And they're probably more skeptical — I mean, I think implicit in their ideology is that America has failed and that multiracial, multicultural states are doomed to failure. And I don't — you know, I'm not there, and I hope I don't ever get there, but you could certainly imagine scenarios under which their vision, which would be probably a pretty unpleasant and violent vision, would come to pass. But yes, I know some of those folks, and I think the way I described the differences are the way they are. But yeah, they're part of a Venn diagram. There's intersection between them and the paleos, yes.

**WOODS:** I guess what seems reasonable to me about them is that what they're fundamentally questioning is the neocon Straussian line that the United States is a propositional nation. They're question really there can be such a thing as a propositional nation. It sounds in principle like that should work, that everybody settles at a particular place, and they've all adopted the same philosophical views.

Now first of all, that's a huge assumption, because it doesn't really seem to work that way, especially when your policy is to invite people from all over the place who have radically different views from you. And even Thomas Jefferson thought that was a dumb idea, thought, why would I want to encourage and make it part of the identity of my country that I encourage people from the Old World, even fellow Europeans to come here, when they have no experience living in a free society.

But anyway, the idea of a propositional nation, that we can all just live together on the basis of ideas, and will that work and will it not degenerate into people think of themselves in terms of race and their background, and they agitate for state benefits on that basis. Will it necessarily degenerate into that? Maybe it will. The state poisons everything.

**MCCONNELL:** Yeah, I think they're certainly right about propositional nations being very weak gruel to keep a nation together. I mean, the Soviet Union was in a way a propositional nation, and that collapsed. So I think they're right about that. I mean, there are people who are not as, say, racially conscious as the alt-right who question the idea of a propositional nation and just realize implicitly, as of course any real person does, that it's easier to have a polity if there's some naturally shared backgrounds, values, religion or religiously generated values and assumptions about how to live. And that political science truism that I'd rather you to be a minority in my country than me be a minority in yours is probably universally true. So yeah.

**WOODS:** I guess what I appreciate about them is their visceral — and this is not a blanket statement, because some of them are crazy the same way some of my libertarians are crazy. That's the way it is. You go to the Libertarian Party Convention, you're going to see some crazy people. That's just the nature of things. I'd bet I'd find a lot of crazy lunatics at the Republican Convention. So I don't hold that against them. But they puncture these thoughtless Orwellian slogans, like "diversity is our strength." Well, in some situations you could see diversity being your strength, like in your book collection. Maybe you don't want to have all science fiction. Maybe it'd be better for you to branch out. But I'm not necessarily sure that diversity is always my strength. I mean, maybe if I lived on a street where half the people wanted to kill me, that wouldn't be a strength. Maybe I'd want to have more people who are like me. There's nothing a priori about that, but unfortunately the Left believes that that is an a priori statement, that diversity is your strength. But doesn't that sound like it came right out of *1984*?

**MCCONNELL:** Yeah, it does. No, the alt-right's lack of deference to political correct platitudes is one of the more refreshing aspects about them, and in that sense, I mean, they sort of remind me of radical leftists or yuppies or something when I was growing up and a young person. It's like you just say the most extreme things, and you don't give a damn about what the conformist or the respectable attitude is. And that's probably useful in politics, generally, for some people to be doing that.

**WOODS:** All right, it's unfair of me to focus so much on this. Let me get back to your book. I want to ask you a couple more things before I let you go. I find it very interesting the story of, I think it was Norman Podhoretz, and you went up to him at some kind of a dinner event, and he said something like, you know, Scott, I always liked you, but then you wrote something against Israel. And he made very clear that there would be no discussion between the two of you at the dinner. You remember this incident that I'm talking about?



**MCCONNELL:** I do remember. It was a party at Wally Weymouth's house, actually, in probably 2000, 2001. It was sort of in the transition period between when I was a neoconservative and had a whole circle of neoconservative friends and when I didn't have any. And yeah, I mean, Norman I think has been able to live a life in intellectual and policy circles where they've been effectively able to banish criticism of Israel from acceptable discourse. And then they would like to — it goes on, and they would like to be able to banish John Mearsheimer; they would like to be able to banish any, no matter how moderate, Palestinian spokesman, and just have them, like, not exist. You know, James Zogby, not exist.

And in this case it was Norman, I had known pretty well. I had been to his house, and he had been to mine, and we communicated many times on the phone about pieces and stuff, and I liked him a lot. But boy, you know, he got wind of — this was a piece I'd written for *New York Press* or something, a really obscure, free weekly newspaper in New York, but it was obviously kind of sent around, so he got wind of it. And suddenly, oh, Scott McConnell said something bad about Israel. He was very funny about it, actually. I said, well, you know, what piece are you talking about, and he said, oh, you've written more than one, immediately, which, you know, I probably had (laughing).

**WOODS:** But your pieces, though — and I really want to emphasize this. Early on in the book, you reproduce a letter you wrote to David Horowitz, and that letter is very measured and generous and kind. It is not vindictive; it's not angry. There's nothing that anybody — *anybody* — even the biggest hysteric out there, could call anti-Semitism in it. It's extremely measured, and you say, you know, I think maybe you might want to think twice about some of these ideas that you have. That's been the tone that you've taken all along. Like, you've never been a bomb thrower, from what I can see.

**MCCONNELL:** No, I'm not a bomb thrower. Yeah, I mean, I believe — as far as Israel's concerned, I think under the circumstances I think Israel has a right to exist; I just think that they should try to make a fair compensation to the people it displaced. The Palestinians are certainly willing to accept, like, a much smaller share of Palestine than they had in 1920 or 1940 or 1948. And I'm not one of these people who think Israel is some — the existence of Israel is some completely off-the-wall sin, because in terms of what peoples and nations have done it's not. But you know, it did displace people, and those people should have political rights too. And I think anti-Semitism, as far as I know, I mean, my life is so integrated and has been always with Jews, I have not, I don't think, been called an anti-Semite — not by David Horowitz, certainly, and not by the Podhoretzes. I mean, that's just kind of their nuclear weapon.

**WOODS:** Well, one last thing I want to ask you about, because you have this chapter on "*The Weekly Standard's War*," and in there you talk about how successful *The Weekly Standard* has been, that it's hard to think of a magazine that's had this kind of success, if by success you mean not necessarily financial success but influence and

getting its ideas accepted and acted upon in high circles. So say something about that, the relationship between that magazine and that war.

**MCCONNELL:** Well, they had been agitating for a war against Iraq almost from their inception, and certainly from the late '90s onward — meaning, like, every couple months there'd be some cover story about how Saddam Hussein is building nuclear weapons, and lots of serious people would be quoted saying, you know, we have to deal with this. And basically Bill Clinton was not going to start a war with Iraq, and most Republicans weren't either. Even Dick Cheney — it wasn't on George Bush's and Dick Cheney's agenda at all.

And then came 9/11, and suddenly *The Weekly Standard* was this spearhead of this remarkable propaganda effort, which basically said that George W. Bush would be appeasing or surrendering in the War on Terror if he doesn't attack Iraq, which, I mean, Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11, nothing to do with radical Islam, didn't have nuclear weapons, any of that stuff. But because of a kind of effective part of the Murdoch media network — you know, I mean TV and think-tanks and the magazine — able to essentially sell this notion to Cheney and to the Republican Party. And the Democrats, who were basically cowed by afraid of being called McGovern Democrats or something like that, mostly went along. Barack Obama didn't, and as a result was elected president.

But yeah, *The Weekly Standard* is like an intellectual version of, I guess, the Hearst press, you know, 1890s or something. You know, bellowing for war and getting its way, except the war was really more significant.

**WOODS:** All right, make a prediction for us. The neocons have been quite resilient, so even though they're somewhat down at the moment, I wouldn't call them out. Where do you think their movement is going?

**MCCONNELL:** Well, they've been endorsing — you know, there's a fresh neoconservative endorsement of Hillary every three or four days, of a prominent neoconservative. And I suspect they will try to, assuming that she's elected, which I think is more likely than not, will go back to the Democratic Party, or — and they will also participate, let's say assuming Trump loses, participate in saying Trump has to be completely extirpated from the Republican Party and will try to blame the fact that Trump was not a neocon and said some bad things about the Iraq War and said some accommodating things about getting along with Putin to try to stipulate that that's the reason for his defeat and not the fact that he's a kind of undisciplined, inexperienced politician. So I mean, they will fight on two fronts: a) to roll back Trumpism within the Republican Party, and b) to get positions in the Hillary administration. And I can't — whether they will succeed in that I can't predict. I mean, I'm sure they will get something in a Hillary administration, and I don't really know who will push back and how hard.

**WOODS:** Well, having said that we'll draw this to a close. I'm recommending your book; I really enjoyed reading it. *Ex-Neocon*, it is tantalizingly titled. I'm linking to it at

the show notes page for today, Episode 727; it's [TomWoods.com/727](https://TomWoods.com/727). Of course you can get it on Amazon, but maybe the easier way to remember is just to go to the show notes page and click on it and get it. Scott, best of luck with it, and thanks for your time.

**MCCONNELL:** Thank you very much.