

The War on Dissent Widens

By Jim Lobe

A powerful group of neo-conservatives is launching a new public relations campaign in support of President George W. Bush's war on terrorism.

At a Tuesday gathering of the National Press Club, members of the new Americans for Victory Over Terrorism (AVOT, online at www.avot.org) declared their intention to "take to task those groups and individuals who fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the war we are facing."

Those groups and individuals, AVOT claims, need to be resisted both here and abroad. A full-page AVOT advertisement carried in the Sunday March 10 *New York Times* pointed to radical Islam as "an enemy no less dangerous and no less determined than the twin menaces of fascism and communism we faced in the 20th century." At the same time, the \$128,000 ad lambasted those at home "who are attempting to use this opportunity to promulgate their agenda of 'blame America first'."

"Both [internal and external] threats," the ad continues, "stem from either a hatred for the American ideals of freedom and equality or a misunderstanding of those ideals and their practice."

To expose the internal "threats," AVOT has compiled a sample list of statements by professors, legislators, authors, and columnists that it finds objectionable. The strategy appears similar to an earlier, much-criticized effort to monitor war dissidents by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), a group founded by Lynne Cheney, the wife of Vice President Dick Cheney, and neo-conservative Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman.

AVOT's list of speakers it considers threatening include:

- Congresswoman Maxine Waters, who said, "Some of us, maybe foolishly, gave this president the authority to go after terrorists. We didn't know that he, too, was going to go crazy with it."
- President Jimmy Carter, who assailed Bush's use of the phrase "axis of evil," arguing that it was "overly simplistic and counter-productive."
- Congressman Dennis Kucinich, who accused the president of "canceling, in effect, the First, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Eighth Amendments" and called the war "the patriot games, the lying games, the war games of an unelected president."
- *American Prospect* editor Robert Kuttner criticizing "Bush's dismal domestic policies" and his "dubious notion of a permanent war."
- Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper's Magazine*, who in a recent editorial said that Washington itself has used terrorist tactics during the 1990s, including the bombing of civilian targets in Baghdad and the Balkans.

Who exactly is behind AVOT's efforts? The newly formed organization is headed by a formidable array of right-wing luminaries. At the top of the list is former Secretary of Education and drug czar William Bennett, AVOT's chairman. The group's senior advisers include former CIA director R. James Woolsey; former Reagan Pentagon official Frank Gaffney; William P. Barr, attorney general under George Bush, Sr.; and mega-political donor Lawrence Kadish. AVOT is a project of Empower America—also co-chaired by Bennett—whose principal members include conservative political operatives Jeane Kirkpatrick, Jack Kemp, Vin Weber, and William Cohen.

During the press conference, Bennett insisted that, "We do not wish to silence people,"

adding that for now, AVOT plans to hold teach-ins and public education events, particularly on college campuses.

In response to AVOT's criticism, *Harper's* Lewis Lapham said Bennett is a "wrong-headed jingo and an intolerant scold." He added that AVOT appeared to be a new "front organization for the hard neo-con (neo-conservative) right," which has gained unprecedented influence in the Bush administration, particularly among the top political appointees in the Pentagon and Dick Cheney's office. "This is the war-monger crowd," he said.

Indeed, AVOT is being initially funded primarily by Lawrence Kadish, chairman of the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC) and a top donor to the Republican Party. Kadish, a real estate investor in New York and Florida, was cited by *Mother Jones Magazine* as one of the country's top individual donors, having given \$532,000 to the GOP. His RJC has long tried to build links between the Republican Party, including its Christian Right component, and American Jews.

Bennett, Gaffney, and Woolsey are all veteran members of a neo-conservative network of groups with overlapping boards of directors that have long championed rightwing governments in Israel and, among other things, urged strong U.S. action against both Iraqi President Saddam

Hussein, the Islamic government in Iran, as well as Palestine Authority President Yasser Arafat.

Both Gaffney and Bennett, for example, were two of about three dozen mainly neo-conservative signers of an open letter sent to Bush in the name of the "Project for a New American Century" nine days after the Sept. 11 attacks. It called not only for the destruction of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network, but also to extend the war to Iraq, and possibly to Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestine Authority unless those nations ceased their alleged support of terrorist groups opposed to Israel.

Woolsey, meanwhile, was sent by the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board to Britain in late September to gather evidence that could link Iraq to the Sept. 11. He has since become one of the most visible commentators in the media in favor of extending the war to Baghdad. Woolsey is also on the board of the Jewish Institute for National Security, a hawkish pro-Israel group.

AVOT is also linked through many channels to Richard Perle, chair of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board (which sent Woolsey on his Iraqi quest). Perle, like Jeane Kirkpatrick, perches full time at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a neo-con think-tank that has emerged as the hub of an "axis of incitement"—a small but potent network of like-minded, ultra-hawkish officials, ana-

lysts, and opinion-makers. It appears that AVOT is the latest institutional offspring of that network, which is united by a passionate belief in the inherent goodness and redemptive mission of the United States; the moral cowardice of liberals and European elites; the existential necessity of supporting Israel in the shadow of the Holocaust and in the face of Arab hostility; and the primacy of military power.

These beliefs came through clearly at Tuesday's press conference. Woolsey, for example, told reporters he agreed with those who are "calling the war we're in now World War IV." But Gaffney was the most strident of the speakers at the event, saying that we should be skeptical of our "new-found friends" in the war on terror.

"[We must] pay special attention to friends like Saudi Arabia and Egypt whose ongoing use of media are creating problems for our allies," (implying Israel), Gaffney said. Any criticism of the administration's conduct of the war, he added, could be "interpreted in such a way as to hurt national resolve...(and) embolden the enemy."

(Jim Lobe writes on international affairs for Inter Press Service, Oneworld.net, Foreign Policy in Focus, and AlterNet.org. An earlier version of this commentary appeared on AlterNet.org on March 12, 2002.)

Who's Who in the Bush Administration

online at <http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>