

# The Counter Lobby Mirage: The "Council On The National Interest"

The American establishment is usually all full of itself — both those in power and those who have lost out or retired.

The former is in the headlines every day, of course.

An example of the latter is a relatively new organization which purports to be something of a counter-weight to the infamous Israeli-Jewish lobby whose well-known core organization is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

AIPAC certainly is the quintessential example of political-financial muscle and jaw-boning in Washington.

"The Council For The National Interest," on the other hand, is — to say the least — a lot more image than substance.

A few years in the making — but with little so far to show but for a forum recently on the current diplomatic movement in the Middle East and an extravagant "all expenses paid for you and family" organizing love-fest last year in Orlando, Florida that was bankrolled by Arab royalty — the pretentious sounding **council for the national interest**, "America's lobby" according to its brochure, is in reality no real lobby at all.

Rather CNI is more of a club for defeated Republican politicians and retired State Department consultants. Rather its a very weak and timid, laid-back and ill-conceived, pumped-up and falsely glorified organizational concoction that is more riding public opinion than leading it.

And if it weren't for the fact that such false messiahs of the CNI variety drain away energy and money and hope by giving the illusion of potency but not its reality the whole matter would not be of much import.

But the sad reality is that quite often when there are false messiahs of this kind claiming for themselves the mantle of legitimacy, others then become dispirited and the real challenge remains unmet.

In concept, the notion of a serious opposition lobby to challenge the Israeli-Jewish lobby has been talked and dreamed and fantasized about for a very long time and in many dark corners. But the complexities of creating such an institution for real have proved far too difficult so far for those who have tried.

As for CNI, "America's Lobby," the attempt itself was always far more rhetorical than actual. What has now been created is something of a hollow shell that purports to be in the league of a tough political lobby. But the actuality is that CNI is just one more rather tiny and largely irrelevant political shop with shingle hanging in the Washington listings and primarily serving the personal interests and agendas of its founders and benefactors.

Rather than developing a program with a tough political edge, CNI has chosen to follow the usual and easy pattern, one of pumping lots of resources into such bland efforts as Orlando's forum. For the real purpose of an organization such as CNI is not to break any new ground or really be an alternative lobby. It's enough for a group like this that a few pictures are snapped, a little pamphlet published, a mention or two in the press blown up

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beyond all proportion.

Not only has CNI gotten off to a tortoise-like start, but it has allowed itself to become something of a single-focus organization (Israel's occupation of Palestine) even though it claims to have "the purpose of advancing America's national interest in Middle East policy" in the broad scheme of things.

True enough, AIPAC is pretty much single-purpose. But then that's precisely what AIPAC says it is; whereas CNI's delusions of grandeur make brochure readers gush with awe, but participants shudder with despair.

Ironically, on the day of CNI's first forum, the occasion for this evaluation, an unsolicited comment appeared in the mail from someone not heard from in many months. "I am rapidly losing interest in CNI," noted this former supporter, an all-expenses-paid invitee to Orlando. "I don't know when I have been so disappointed with something that I was so enthusiastic about in the beginning."

And this is hardly an isolated attitude. Indeed some of the founding members of the CNI Board of Directors have decided to

jump ship least their own credibility be soiled. The CNI Chairman doesn't come to Washington very much and didn't even bother to attend the first much-touted forum. And behind-the-scenes some of the original CNI insiders encourage this very kind of critique.

Anyway, no matter really. This AIPAC to CNI comparison is too ludicrous to continue. A visit to Disney World where it was courageously decided to favor Congressional support for reopening Palestinian schools, and a hotel forum that didn't even draw a hundred people or a single media camera, hardly escalate CNI even to puberty.

But here too, if what we were dealing with was an adolescent organization quickly assuming manhood then maybe today's false messiah might be tomorrow's tower source of enlightenment and hope.

Don't hold your breath. In actuality CNI is already probably fatally weakened by lack of coherent and tough leadership, few independent resources, no serious and clear vision of the problems it is dealing with. Indeed, the CNI Executive Director's 4-page hand-out — "What Will George Bush Do With Victory?" — is a rather simplistic admixture of everyday platitudes lacking historical depth and seasoned political vision.

In short, rather than a serious new player in political Washington to forcefully oppose the still omnipotent Israeli-Jewish lobby, what we have in CNI is another team of well-meaning Arabists and friends, this one from the Republican center, taking pictures of themselves, publishing brochures for their flock, and calling for financial help when what is most needed is a great deal of hard-headed rethink-

ing and soul-searching.

No doubt there will be those now enlisted to come to CNI's defense. Assaults on the messenger are the usual method chosen rather than straight-forward discussions of the key issues involved. Furthermore, this critique is rather mild and gentle in comparison to how much more could be said.

One thing to remember. Until all of us who care about a new and different Middle East, about a true and just Israeli-Palestinian settlement, about a dignified relationship between the peoples of the Middle East region to their own governments, about a relationship of equality between the Arab Nation and the West... until all of us are willing to face the realities of today's political and psychological and economic predicaments we can be sure these imperative changes are not close at hand.

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