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James W. Underhill

Excerpt

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## 1 Hope, Obama and the neoconservative worldview

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On 2 November 2009, the [www.nowpublic.com](http://www.nowpublic.com) website published an article whose title made manifest the journalist's scepticism concerning US policy in the Middle East. That title read, 'Is Obama Delivering Hope and Change? What happened to Yes We Can?' Obama had been elected principally because he had convinced voters of his unshakable faith in the American people and his belief in their capacity to find a way out of the cynicism engendered by the Bush administration. Obama urged Americans to forge a new optimism which would inspire them to achieve collectively great things at a time when many were suffering from the global crisis of capitalism, rising unemployment and homelessness. Part of his package was an implicit promise that America would shake off its international reputation – tarnished by neoconservative foreign policy – and rise once more as a symbol of freedom. As the defenders of justice and democracy, they would lead the world onwards into a twenty-first century which had opened with the catastrophe of 9/11. In place of overbearing foreign policy, Obama promised respect and diplomacy, in place of lies and deception, he promised truth and transparency. In place of the carnivorous pursuit of capital accumulation that was pillaging other countries (while impoverishing whole sectors of society at home), Obama promised the world he would consider the greater good of the planet while seeking to protect the interests of his nation.

Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), can hardly be considered 'audacious' (since hope is fundamental to the American worldview and since the USA sincerely believes in itself as 'The Land of Hope and Glory'): nevertheless, that book did affirm clearly, calmly and with conviction, the ideas that one man believed would help regenerate the world of politics and domestic policy. The language of Obama was the language of hope, and that hope seemed to emanate from an entirely different moral dimension from the one the Bush administration had created for Americans. Obama's vision of the world seemed radically different: inspired, healthy, authentic.

The worldview of neoconservatives had taken hold of the Bush administration, and that worldview had taken hold of the American people. Fear and cynicism were eating away at the core of American society. And while one of Bush's more

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successful rhetorical ploys had been to contrast the 'decadent' Old World which had lost its 'moral compass', with his own crusading, by the end of his second term in office, few people believed the USA was leading anyone anywhere other than deeper into trouble. It was a hard lesson for the American people to learn: that they had been duped by their leaders. And it was harder still to be forced to admit that those who had been portrayed as posturing fools, cowards, traitors and Machiavellian manipulators seeking to advance their own agendas (charges made concerning France, Germany and Russia) had in fact been well-advised to refuse to engage in the war in Iraq alongside American troops.

The disappointment and despondency of the American people expressed itself in language: not only in the positions taken up, but in the very words of American English. Existing words seemed impotent to express the outrage, disgust and contempt for the administration that had impoverished the nation through waging a war that had served only to enrich a minute fraction of the country's business community. And when words appear impotent, creativity takes hold of language and generates new forms of expression: neologisms are coined to describe new realities. It became commonplace to speak of being 'iraqued' as in the following example:

We were *Iraqued* – that is, we were attacked not for anything we'd done but for someone's inflated fears of what we might do; shot, gassed ... (www.starhawk.org, 8 December 2003)

At other times, the entire Bush administration was characterized as a capitalist plot, a war machine whose sole purpose was to generate fear in order to smoke-screen the ravenous pursuit of the wealth and power of one class of American society. Certain Americans spoke of the 'Bush Crime Syndicate' (see www.youtube.com, The Bush Crime Syndicate (part 2/2), 26 February, 2012). Others spoke of 'Iraquet', the manipulation of the media and the misuse of federal funds in an economic war of benefit to a small minority of Americans (see the song, 'Iraquet', written by Rowlands and Robertson, copyright 2002, www.geocities.ws/daverowlands77/hopeandfade/lyrics/Iraquet.htm, 26 February, 2012). Politicians were compared to gangsters: they were deemed something akin to the 'robber barons' of nineteenth-century industrial Britain or the new oligarchs of post-Soviet Russia.

The average American was suffering. True, it would be somewhat perverse to focus upon the American malaise at the expense of empathising with the real victims of the Bush administration. The bombing of civilians, the destruction of whole neighbourhoods, the disruption of production, distribution, hospitals and schools in both Iraq and Afghanistan certainly produced countless real victims. Surely, such victims deserve more sympathy than American citizens in general and the soldiers who naively signed up to do their duty and to serve blindly Uncle Sam. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that life for American citizens in general became harder, became darker, became embittered under the

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Bush administration. The Americans' faith in the political class had been seriously shaken by the end of Bush's two terms in office. And if we are to understand something of the way in which Obama will try to navigate his nation and negotiate with the world, we must understand to what extent he and the whole American people were unable to escape the transformation of the American worldview which took place in the years following Bush's election.

But change in worldviews comes hard. Obama too was to some degree the accomplice of the reigning ideology of the first decade of the twenty-first century. To claim that Obama is a neoconservative would be absurd. Obama struggled against the Bush administration, denounced the war in Iraq and tirelessly critiqued foreign and domestic strategy throughout both Bush's terms in office. Nevertheless, two facts must be borne in mind. To oppose an argument, we must, inevitably, to a certain extent, embrace and condone the terms upon which that argument is based. That is to say, we do not escape the concepts imposed upon us by our opponents. To this extent, opposition presupposes a certain degree of 'conceptual complicity'. Secondly, the neoconservatives had transformed the American worldview to such a degree that it would be naive to imagine that Obama could have won the election without engaging in the fundamental arguments of the neoconservatives and without accepting their concepts.

Like most worldview-transforming movements, the neoconservatives harnessed tradition and radically transfigured it. The form that emerged would allow them to use tradition as a means of propelling their own interests within the framework of future policy. Hope was fundamental. The New World was a utopia-project, a religious crusade. The story is well known. Once on the American continent, the 'settlers moved steadily west and southwest, successive administrations described the annexation of territory in terms of "manifest destiny" – the conviction that such expansion was preordained, part of God's plan to extend what Andrew Jackson called "the area of freedom" across the continent'. The words could be those of any US citizen, the lines from a school book on history, or the lines from a speech from a politician from any of the American parties. In fact, they come from Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* (281). True, the inverted commas are his too. Obama offers a careful critique of both the history of American foreign policy and the Cold War era which generated antagonism and fear. He claims that 'American foreign policy has always been a jumble of warring impulses' (280), and he lucidly admits that many countries recognize the history of the colonisation of America 'for what it was – an exercise in raw power' (281).

What is remarkable, however, considering the astuteness of Obama, and given his evident desire to be honest with himself and with the American people, is that he fails utterly to escape the fundamental concepts which were to equip the neoconservatives with their moral agenda for war. Obama accepts the concept of 'manifest destiny'. The God-given right of the settlers to take up residence is

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not denounced. That same moral crusading was transposed onto the Old World during the First and Second World Wars, and, in turn, to the Middle East when the Bush administration set about transforming the whole world in the image of the New World. While it is true that Obama criticized neoconservative foreign policy, he did not question the legitimacy of their expansionist policy. What he found fault with was the technical and tactical means by which the neoconservatives proposed to set about the task of remodelling the world. Obama briefly quoted John Quincy Adams, who claimed that America should not venture abroad ‘in search of monsters to destroy’ (quoted in Obama 2006: 280). But he quickly forgot Quincy’s advice that Providence has charged America with the task of making a new world, not reforming the old (*ibid.*).

That Obama opposed the Bush administration and attacked its policies is irrefutable, but he did not question the underlying forces driving their policies. He did not stand outside their ‘world’, but walked right in and took his stance within the coordinates of their political and economic agenda. We think in language, and Obama, even when he opposed the Bush administration, was thinking within the language of the neoconservatives.

The concepts of the settlers were to shape the discourse of the neoconservatives during the nineties and most of all after 9/11. Saddam Hussein was represented as an ‘outlaw’: a figment of the frontier imagination – and the USA became a sheriff. European leaders were invited to fulfil their civic duty in joining the posse. Obama did not denounce such rhetoric, nor did he critique the notion of ‘rogue states’. Indeed, though the tone is not his habitual mode of expression, Obama did not disapprove of what he called ‘our desire to slap down rogue states’ (290). Obama did criticize – and loudly too – the ‘bad execution’ of the war in Iraq (302). He considered it ‘a failure of conception’, a project plagued by ‘a series of ad hoc decisions, with dubious results’ (*ibid.*). Besides, as he put it: ‘What I sensed, though, was that the threat Saddam posed was not imminent, the Administration’s rationales for war were flimsy and ideologically driven’ (294).

Nevertheless, Obama engaged the arguments of the neoconservatives on their own terms. He took his stance without denouncing the debate. As a result, he wholeheartedly embraced the concept of ‘security’. In analysing Woodrow Wilson’s initial reticence at the beginning of the First World War, Obama could have been writing his own autobiography. Though tempted to avoid involvement in conflicts in Europe, Wilson finally understood after German U-boat attacks on American vessels, that neutrality was untenable. Obama concluded: ‘America had emerged as the world’s dominant power – but a power whose prosperity Wilson now understood to be linked to peace and prosperity in far-away lands’ (282).

Obama went on to explain: ‘It was in an effort to address this new reality that Wilson sought to reinterpret the idea of America’s manifest destiny. Making

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“the world safe for democracy” didn’t just involve winning a war, he argued: it was in America’s interest to encourage the self-determination of all people, and provide the world a legal framework that could help avoid future conflicts’ (282–3). Given the complexity of America’s foreign relations (which Obama seems to understand full well), what is frightening here is his manifest faith in the vocation of the American people. The American people not only can, they *must* change the world. Obama’s conviction is unshakable on this point. For this reason, Obama takes to heart the words of Theodore Roosevelt:

The United States of America has not the option as to whether it will or will not play a great part in the world ... It *must* play a great part. All that it can decide is whether it will play that part well or badly. (Roosevelt, quoted by Obama 2006: 282)

The neoconservatives openly declared their adherence to this concept of America’s vocation. For them, America was a world-transforming project. What they added to traditional American beliefs were three elements:

1. The unscrupulous pursuit of economic gain. The argument behind this was logical enough: a strong economy made for a strong nation. Inevitably, however, such a policy, in practice, constantly confused private or corporate interests with national interests.
2. A culture of fear.
3. The conviction that since the end of the Cold War, history had come to an end, and that no nation, no culture, no ideology and no economic model could oppose the will of the world (which had been revealed to the American people, and which had already been realized in their constitution).

The crucial question for our own times is to what degree Obama’s administration can escape the neoconservative worldview. The task will take more than skill and integrity: it will require an entire critique of the underlying principles which construct that worldview. It will require coming to understand the way in which the neoconservatives have succeeded in harnessing tradition and framing the debates driving American foreign policy.

Hope will not suffice. On the contrary, hope may well prove to be Obama’s failing, his hubris. It may well bring about his downfall. A belief that America can change the world for the better and that Obama’s administration can clear up after the Bush administration may well transform ‘Yes We Can!’ into ‘How the Hell Could We Have Hoped to?’ Although Obama cannot be fairly condemned for the failure of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to come to an acceptable closure, Bush’s wars have now, in a very real sense, become ‘Obama’s wars’. In September 2010, Bob Woodward published his book entitled *Obama’s Wars*, questioning the legitimacy of sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan under the command of a president who seems not to endorse the war in principle. And April 2011 saw the publication of book with a similar

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title, James Gannon's *Obama's War: Avoiding Quagmire in Afghanistan*. The role is not enviable: Obama has stepped into the world created by the neoconservatives and is expected to find a solution, a way out.

As expected, the President's popularity took a serious blow during the November elections to the Senate in 2010, and on 3 November, Obama found himself forced to publicly concede that in listening to the American people, he heard their 'deep frustration' with the lack of progress in alleviating poverty (Council of Foreign Relations website, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org), consulted 10 November). But even as early as 2009, scepticism was taking hold of hope, making Obama's rhetoric sound naive at best, hollow and deceitful at worst. *The Economist* expressed doubts as to Obama's capacities in an article entitled 'The Quiet American' on 26 November 2009:<sup>1</sup>

Does this president have a strategy, backed if necessary by force, to reorder the world? Or is he merely a presidential version of Alden Pyle, Graham Greene's idealistic, clever Quiet American who wants to change the world, but underestimates how bad the world is – and ends up causing harm?

The journalists of *The Economist* berated Obama for being 'faint-hearted' and for having 'dithered, not deliberated' on Afghanistan (*ibid.*). Criticism is all too easy, though. *The Economist* moves with the wind, sniffing the breeze, before whistling a tune it feels fits the times. By the end of 2009, it had taken up the punching gloves once more, and was pummelling Obama. As we shall see in our final case study on war, *The Economist* had taken exactly the same tough-man pose in 2002, when it promoted the war in Iraq. Yet it was to denounce that war only a few months after the invasion, when it became obvious that the supposed weapons of mass destruction were a fiction invented by the warmongering parties. Unlike the President of the USA, the journalists of *The Economist* take the liberty of moralising, but feel themselves to be under no compunction to remain true to any particular moral or political stance. Obama's dilemma is of an entirely different nature and scope. And, as a statesman (worthy of the term), at least Obama appears to display a sincere desire to be held accountable for his acts and for the impact his country has upon the world. The question is: how much manoeuvring space does he have to change policy?

At a time when the US economy is faltering and many American citizens are suffering from a combination of the economic crisis and a welfare service which proves incapable of protecting them against unemployment and destitution, is it likely that Obama can risk going against US corporate interests in foreign policy? Leaving law and order in Iraq is certainly the aim of Obama, but what 'law' does that mean, and what form of social and economic 'order' are we speaking about? The neoconservatives did much to obscure their aims and desires, but their policies leave little room for doubt. *The Economist* called

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the regime-change project ‘a capitalist dream’ (quoted in Harvey 2003: 215). As Harvey, an anthropologist and specialist of geographical economic development, put it:

Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, promulgated a series of decrees which included ‘the full privatization of public enterprises, full ownership rights by foreign firms of Iraqi businesses, full repartition of foreign profits ... the opening of Iraq’s banks to foreign control, national treatment for foreign companies and ... the elimination of nearly all trade barriers’. The orders were to apply to all areas of the economy. Only oil was exempt (presumably because of its special status and geopolitical significance). A flat tax (a regressive taxation system much favoured by certain neo-conservatives in the US) was imposed. Strikes were outlawed, and rights to unionize much restricted. (213–14)

Iraq’s interim trade minister denounced this strategy as a flagrant display of ‘free market fundamentalism’ (*ibid.* 214). Chomsky was arguing, by 2010, that this free-market utopia had ended in failure, and that American corporate capitalists had failed to extract the right to set up permanent military bases in Iraq and to gain full control over energy rights. But it was Iraqi nationalism, not goodwill, that prevented America from exploiting Iraq, in his opinion. And the massive disappearance of artworks from Ancient Babylon has done little to reassure critics who cry out against the ‘looting’ of the country. Nobody questions the desire of Obama to believe in America and in the American people. Few people doubt his desire to be honest. But, in stepping into Bush’s shoes, what kind of foreign policy does he ‘truly’ desire?

### Words of truth

Again and again, we will return to the question of telling the truth in this book. Taking up the ‘lies’ of the neoconservatives is only one aspect of this philosophical question. But the question of bad faith is much vaster, much more profound. Ultimately, what is ‘lying’?

If lying were restricted to failing to tell the truth, then truth would be a relatively simple matter: it would be difficult to discern, but easy to determine, once the hidden intention was compared to the pretence. But manipulation is more complex. Truth can involve hiding things from yourself, i.e. bad faith. And bad faith is a great generator of words and pretexts. As we have seen, the resentment against political obfuscation led to the coining of neologisms such as ‘iraquet’. But the build-up to the war involved moving beyond individual isolated words: the representation of invasion was transformed. Warmongering was presented as a quest for a peaceful solution to a problem that must be solved. Bill Clinton was reproached for leaving business ‘untended’. The ‘irresponsibility’ of Clinton was to be followed by the earnest assuming of ‘responsibility’ by the neoconservatives: the shoulders



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of George W. Bush were large enough to bear the burden. At one level, this involved passing war off as something else. Invasion became 'regime change': it became 'liberation'. Civilian casualties were considered to be the inevitable collateral victims who must be sacrificed for the greater good of 'saving' the Iraqis. And if the USA and Britain did engage in war, they were simply taking up the challenge forced upon them by a dictator who had 'ignited' the war by refusing to comply with investigators looking for hidden missiles (despite affirmations to the contrary by the chief inspector, Hans Blix). Grammar was enlisted in the 'selling' of the war in Iraq. The USA became a passive party upon which war was imposed. The Iraqi ruler was portrayed as provoking the USA. He was challenging them. Ironically, there is a lack of symmetry here, because it was not Iraq which was represented as forcing the war upon the USA, it was Saddam himself. Personification was enlisted as a strategy of propaganda. It was crucial to focus upon the person. Saddam became the personification of tyranny and evil. And logically, it was he that was bombed, not the Iraqis. The USA went in there 'to take him out', to catch the 'outlaw', to bring him to justice. He was a 'serial offender'. This served to distract attention from the bombing of schools and hospitals, the deaths of civilian men, women and children who were burned alive or crushed under collapsing buildings. Images of such events were not shown in the USA, and were carefully tailored even in countries such as France, which had come down in opposition to invasion. Such images were, however, watched throughout the Arab world thanks to internet journalism.

The reason that US propaganda was so successful at home was that the neoconservatives managed to metaphorically transform war into something entirely different. This transformation will be taken up in detail in the chapter on war. But it is necessary to stress here that the metaphors used to make war palatable managed to do two crucial things. Firstly, they managed to activate the myths of the frontier, so fundamental to American identity. The sheriff was coming to sort out the wild world after having sorted out the Wild West: and he would stop at nothing. Secondly, the neoconservative rhetoric managed to transform the perception of the war throughout the world and most importantly throughout the media of the USA. Whether journalists were advocates for or opponents to the war, they adopted the fundamental premises upon which neo-conservatives had based their arguments. The 'war against terrorism' refused the status of soldiers to those opposing US will and US firepower. At the same time, the insistence that this 'war' against terror, was truly a war and must be waged as such both at home and abroad, was used to justify the suspension of civil rights at home and the detention and torture of persons who, 'in peacetime' would have been considered innocent until proven guilty. The neo-conservatives shifted the debate, and everyone sang along with them in tune, however much they chanted their disaccord.



**Linguistic patterning**

Despite the impression these opening pages may have given, this book is not intended as a political treatise. This is a book about language and worldviews. This is a book about linguistic communities, the worlds they live within, and the way their worldviews interact, and the way they seek to impose themselves on one another when they come into conflict. Specialists of the Middle East exist, and their works are numerous. Marxist scholars such as Harvey and political critics such as Chomsky are far more qualified to discuss the future of New Imperialism and what is at stake in American foreign policy. Nevertheless, ethnolinguistics has something to bring to political debate. And ethnolinguistics itself is fundamentally political. The study of the worlds that linguistic communities construct for themselves and sustain by their communication cannot simply restrict itself to the construction of exotic, static, apolitical models of worldviews. Worldviews exist in time and space: historical, social and political space.

People live in language, and language is inherently and inescapably political. A discourse-based ethnolinguistics, an ethnolinguistics which takes on board discourse analysis and metaphor theory, will have much to say about politics, since all politics is carried out with words. Diplomacy, coercion and declaring war, all entail words, and even attempts to justify and render ‘acceptable’ the most brutal and brutish forms of action take us back into the sphere of speaking. Words are not innocent. They must therefore be weighed carefully, in order to allow us to see what they are ‘worth’. Words are used to hide strategies as much as they are used to explicate them. Manifest destiny, building democracy, winning the peace, bringing law and order, terrorists, insurgents, enemies, rogue states, defenders of democracy, are all concepts which must be treated with suspicion. Moreover, words turn out to be only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to language and propaganda. Because, however complex individual concepts turn out to be, they remain, nevertheless, relatively easy to understand, to analyse and critique, when compared to the more surreptitious forms of rhetoric and manipulation. Using personification to diabolize the enemy, holding up Saddams and Bin Ladens, serves to consolidate a ‘we-against-him’ scenario, a seductive narrative in which we are all invited to play the ‘good guys’ who set off to lynch the miscreant. Meanwhile, the inevitable civilian casualties must pay the price of our self-glorification.

Conceptual metaphors and discourse strategies are enlisted to frame our understanding and focus our attention on one aspect of the question, while effacing the implications of strategies and ‘solutions’. Indeed, given the anarchy in Afghanistan (which was predicted by generals of the Russian army, many of whom had fallen from grace during their own occupation of the territory), it now seems ludicrous that the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq were

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presented as ‘problem solving’. Blair, however, argued that war would, in fact, be a solution. The one-time pacifist Mussolini had justified his own declaration of war in similar terms: according to him, the Second World War would be the war to end all wars, the war that would bring peace. In the war against Iraq, pacifism was used once more to drive warmongering. Looking back, many of the arguments used to justify the invasion of Iraq appear shoddy and tasteless. Yet they were mortally efficient, and many of our respectable newspapers adopted those arguments.

Concerns over the cost of the war in Iraq were framed in terms of the ‘price tag’ of invasion. Such expressions reveal the grotesque commercial reasoning behind the war. But they succeeded in transforming the war itself from an active experience of disaster and destruction into a ‘product’. Such rhetoric transformed the citizens of the USA and the UK into consumers deciding whether to buy or not.

What this propaganda shows, of course, is that language is political. And this involves a challenge to linguistics in general and to ethnolinguistics in particular. A linguistics which hides from politics is an amputated crippled science incapable of approaching language in all its full and complex dimensions. The essentialist forms of ethnology which concentrate upon the distinct nature of linguistic communities tend to downplay or even ignore this political dimension. But, as we shall see, as soon as we move beyond the most basic and fundamental forms of conceptual paradigms (often the preferred spheres of ethnologists and anthropologists), involving founding myths and kinship systems, actual speech takes us into power struggles, shifting hierarchies and attempts to defend identity. For this reason, ethnolinguistics cannot ignore the shifting influences of worldviews upon each other. Philology cannot escape politics.

Using words and phrases, using the active or the passive form, using metaphor and personification, we strategically situate ourselves in relation to others. All words circulate in society and, to a great extent, many of our fundamental everyday expressions derive from the strategies of interested parties, and are used to consolidate their position in society. An aristocratic regime will coin representations of a royal nature. God will be represented as the ‘King’ in the heavens, and his believers will be represented as his subjects and his servants. This metaphysical dimension serves to consolidate the legitimacy of the existing order. And our own largely post-aristocratic societies have not escaped the conceptual dominance of such thought patterns. We continue to speak (using politically charged hierarchies) of ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ classes (concepts which reaffirm the existing social order). We can ‘put someone in their place’ because we believe everyone, ultimately, ‘has their place’ in the existing order. Consequently, it is unacceptable for someone to ‘get above their station’. An ‘upstart’ belongs down below in the ‘gutter’ with ‘the dregs of society’.