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Project for the New American Carnivore

From Lyman to Niman in 10 short years

by James LaVeck and Jenny Stein

In 1997, while attending our first national animal advocacy conference in Washington DC, we were surprised to find that one of the speakers was a former cattle rancher. His name was Howard Lyman, and not only was he now a vegan, but he had publicly renounced the exploitation of animals and dedicated the rest of his life to sharing with the world the lessons he had learned about ethical eating, environmental sanity, and peaceful grassroots activism. His message, along with that of several other people we heard at that conference, inspired us to change our own diets and join the movement for nonviolence and animal rights.

Now, ten years later, another conference is happening in our nation's capital. While several of the speakers and supporters remain the same, this year's most publicized animal protection conference will not be featuring any cattlemen gone vegan. Instead, it will be putting on the podium a multi-million dollar rancher, a pig farmer, a turkey farmer, and others known for talking of compassion and animal welfare while at the same time profiting from their unapologetic killing of animals.

Now, ten years later, a well-known animal sanctuary, as well as organizations that are the public face of animal advocacy in the United States, have partnered with members of the meat industry to develop "new and improved" standards for the exploitation of animals, and to actively promote consumption of products such as "cage-free" eggs and "animal compassionate" veal.

Now, ten years later, veganism, once widely understood within our movement to be a moral and ethical imperative, a commitment to not participate in the exploitation of others nor to cooperate with those who do, is rapidly being reduced to a mere "lifestyle choice," a "tool," to be selectively used as a means to an end. Similarly, the concept of animal rights, once widely understood to represent a zero-tolerance policy on the exploitation of animals, has become so diluted and degraded, as we shall later see, so as to be comfortably invoked by those who butcher thousands of baby cows and lambs every week.

For us, and for many other activists we have spoken with over these last months, this turn of events has been equal parts disturbing and bewildering. For some it has even been the cause of despair. There is a sense that the movement we have given our lives to is being cynically co-opted and transformed into a caricature of itself.

As we have worked to understand what is happening and why, we have gradually realized that something about this dark experience is eerily familiar. It is, in fact, strongly reminiscent of the cultural and political changes that have befallen our country over the last several years, changes resulting from the Neo-conservative domination of Washington politics.

Rise of the Neo-carns

As most of us know, the Neo-cons are a relatively small network of policy analysts, political operatives and elected officials who have been the driving force behind the radical shift America's foreign policy has taken over the last several years. Their Project for the New American Century, a think-tank now famous for spawning most of the players and policies behind the US invasion of Iraq, openly advocates for world domination through military force.

What fewer are aware of, however, is that amongst the founders of the Neo-con movement were several former liberals, and it was their insider knowledge of progressive politics that made the Neo-cons so effective at discrediting their former ideology and advancing a new and radical agenda. It was the Neo-cons who conceived of making a doctrine of pre-emptive war official US policy. It was the Neo-cons who found a way to make secret prisons and systematic torture not only legal, but also socially acceptable.

We have developed a hypothesis that some of the more mystifying changes that have come to the movement for veganism and animal rights in recent years can largely be explained by the adoption of the Neo-con mindset and methods by a handful of influential animal organization leaders, philosophers and animal husbandry consultants, several of whom are former animal rights activists. They are the *Neo-carns*, and they have partnered with certain segments of the animal exploiting industries, using their insider knowledge to redefine the animal movement just as radically as the Neo-cons have redefined the policies of our government, with a similarly disastrous effect.

Our hypothesis is not a conspiracy theory, but rather a theory of cultural influence and unconscious imitation. By speculating about what might be some significant parallels between Neo-conservatism and Neo-carnism, we hope to inspire a community-based critical thinking process in service of a healthier and more effective movement.

Enriching the exploiters

Over the last few years, thousands of American soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens have been killed, maimed, and psychologically scarred, their families torn apart. The economies of both countries have been bled just as severely to pay for all the mayhem, all in the name of "bringing democracy" to Iraq and "preventing terrorist attacks" in America.

As doubtful as the benefits of this endless "War on Terror" will continue to be for those millions of individuals whose lives hang in the balance, its perpetuation is nothing short of a goldmine for the management and stockholders of a number of multi-national defense contractors and oil companies. For no matter how many innocent people die, these corporations will get paid huge sums of money to build the bombs, and then after the bombs are dropped, get paid even more money to rebuild the buildings and infrastructure the bombs have blown apart. In fact, the greater the destruction, the more money they will ultimately make. Such corporations have close ties to the Neo-cons, and it is well-known that some of the profits they make flow right back into the coffers that fund the Neo-con political machine.

Similarly, The Neo-carns have formed an alliance with a group of large-scale meat sellers and animal exploiters who publicly proclaim their concern for the well-being of those they kill for profit. Working

together, they are developing and promoting new standards for the exploitation of animals, and co-producing media events and public relations campaigns that culminate in mutually-beneficial legislative initiatives, all of it amounting to what we might call an endless “Campaign to Refine the Process of Exploitation.”

However uncertain the benefits to the animals and the animal movement will be, this endless campaign waged under the banner of “protecting animals” and “reducing suffering” is virtually guaranteed to bring millions in new profits to the “cage-free” egg industry, the “humane” meat industry, the organic dairy industry, and numerous other purveyors of “happy” animal products. In fact, the more the public is taught to channel their concern for animals into the purchase of these new and pricier products of suffering, the more money these large scale exploiters will ultimately make. Some of this money is already being spent within the advocacy movement, being used to sponsor animal conferences, for example, that are now presenting some of these animal exploiters as respected speakers alongside long-time animal rights advocates.

Butchers for Animal Rights?

Nicolette Hahn Niman, in a recent *New York Times* op-ed, writes with considerable passion and authority about the cruelty and brutality of the common agricultural practice of cutting off the tails of pigs and cows. “Eventually,” she says, “our consciences and common sense—as well as science—should tell us that we need an outright ban.”

Described in Neo-carn media as being “haunted by the pigs she saw while touring pig confinement operations as an environmental attorney,” Niman notes that “Studies have shown that sows confined in gestation stalls exhibit ‘behavior characteristic of humans with severe depression and mental illness.’” Niman’s seeming recognition of the intelligence and emotional capacity of pigs is so persuasive, it nearly succeeds in obliterating our awareness of the 2,000 pigs whose lives are taken each week by her 100 million dollar company, Niman Ranch. One wonders if Ms. Niman has ever taken the time to observe whether each of these 2,000 pigs exhibits physiological and psychological behaviors characteristic of humans, innocent of any crime, being brutally executed one after the other.

Then there’s Randy Strauss of Strauss Veal & Lamb, who is quoted in Neo-carn media saying that veal crates are “inhumane and archaic” and “do nothing more than subject a calf to stress, fear, physical harm and pain,” and has even gone so far as to say that “Animal rights are important.”

Strauss’s strong-sounding “pro-animal” language, as well as his being highlighted and praised by the Neo-carns, distracts us from realizing that he, like the war profiteers, has a vested interest in the endless expansion of the exploitation and the killing. In Strauss’s own words, “We’re now the largest veal company in the United States... We’re slaughtering and processing between 1,700 and 2,500 calves and breaking three to five loads of domestic lamb a week at our Franklin facility.”

“There are a growing number of people who, if they feel good about what they’re eating, will eat veal,” says Strauss. “If we can capture that market, we’re going to increase the 0.6-pound per capita consumption market resulting in a healthier veal industry.”

Squandering the Work of Generations

In a recent *New York Times* article titled “Veal to Love, Without the Guilt,” it was noted that twenty years ago, Americans were eating eight times more veal than today, and that this dramatic change was due to a successful animal rights educational campaign and boycott carried out for years by thousands of animal advocates. The article then goes on to feature the comments of numerous parties who declare how delighted they are to once again be eating veal, except now, the “humanely-raised” veal products are rosy colored and sport a more zesty taste. At some upscale restaurants, this new “guilt-free” delicacy is rapidly becoming one of the most popular items.

Could this have anything to do with a prominent farm animal sanctuary and numerous animal protection groups putting their moral authority and the names of their organizations behind new “more humane” standards for the exploitation of dairy calves? Does it have anything to do with their publishing lists on the internet of restaurants that virtuously serve up the flesh of “uncrated” baby cows, or their elaborate PR collaborations with meat sellers such as Whole Foods and restaurateur Wolfgang Puck, who is only too happy to tell the world how much tastier “happy” animals can be?

Puck has recently launched a high profile PR initiative that includes the development of new “humane” exploitation standards. His company told *Special Events* magazine that it would use the resulting media exposure “to educate consumers and provide ‘how to’ information on using fresh, natural, organic and *humanely treated ingredients.*” [Emphasis added].

This initiative succeeds brilliantly at marketing Puck’s expensive products, among which veal is one of the top selling items. It also has caused the animals themselves to disappear. Now they are no longer individuals, sentient beings being exploited and killed. They are merely “humanely treated ingredients.” This single example captures the essence of what is wrong with so many Neo-carn “victories.” Lots of press and hoopla, the public image of animal exploiters lifted to the heavens along with that of their Neo-carn partners, and the basic truth of what is being done to the animals, the most inconvenient truth of them all, methodically swept under the rug.

Irrational Rationalizations

The architects of the Neo-carn revolution seem as blithely untroubled by the unraveling of the veal boycott as the Neo-cons are by the unraveling of American civil liberties. One prominent Neo-carnist offered the following in response to an advocate’s criticism of his organization’s role in the breaking of the veal boycott:

Of course, when people stopped eating veal in the 1980s, it meant more animals were being exploited, since people largely switched from veal to chicken and/or fish (who are much smaller animals). Lots of animal people tout the anti-veal campaign as the paradigmatic “incremental abolitionist” campaign, even though the result was that far more animals ended up being raised/killed as a result of it.

So just as the Neo-cons ask us to believe that we should allow our civil liberties to be curtailed as a means of protecting our “freedom,” the Neo-carns ask us to believe that putting the animal movement seal of approval upon the new “humane” veal is actually saving the lives of animals. In both cases,

there appears to be a comfort with assuming ownership and control of — and then “spending” — the decades-long work of large numbers of well meaning people in ways that directly contradict the original intent.

Compassion for Sale

And then there is Whole Foods Markets, one of the largest meat sellers in America, and now a major sponsor of numerous animal conferences. Whole Foods CEO John Mackey is commonly presented as a business visionary committed to reconciling record levels of profit with philanthropic altruism. *The Catholic Reporter*, in fact, described Mr. Mackey as one of the few CEOs who “remain as models of ethics in both their personal and professional lives.”

However, it was recently reported in the *New York Times* that over the course of eight years, Mackey made more than 1,000 posts on a popular internet financial forum under a false identity, touting his own company’s stock and deprecating a competing company’s stock, a company he is now in the process of attempting to buy.

In a popular vegetarian magazine, where Mackey has now twice been honored for his “vegan” values, he was recently described like this:

Mackey’s compassion for animals led to Whole Foods’ implementation of a humane production system to ensure the industry’s highest quality conditions for animals raised for food. Whole Foods Markets’ stringent quality-standards program requires frequent auditing and compliance from animal agriculture producers, making it tricky for even the slickest rancher to slip beneath this progressive company’s radar.

However, after years of such unqualified animal movement endorsements and what is essentially a massive branding and advertising campaign carried out for free by trusting animal activists, apparently not even one of the “animal compassionate” exploitation standards Mackey and his suppliers developed in collaboration with participating animal organizations has been put into practice. According to the Whole Foods Animal Compassion Foundation web site, “although no producers have met these standards yet, many are exploring the opportunity.”

Perhaps the problem will be solved when Whole Foods fills its new Alternative/Compassionate Farm Animal Production Coordinator position. “We are looking for someone,” says the job posting on the Whole Foods web site, “who can bring solid evidence that they can produce a meat product in a pasture based system that will leave the taste buds screaming for more, and then get out there and help others do the same.”

Curiously, at the upcoming national animal conference, Mackey’s multi-billion dollar grocery chain will be presenting a talk titled “Whole Foods Market: The Journey Towards Transparency, Accountability and Responsibility with Farm Animal Welfare.”

Curious, and Curiouser

Is it not strange that while the institutional animal movement has historically struggled to develop and sustain any significant collaborations with the peace, environmental, and human rights movements, it seems to have had no problem at all developing elaborate and rather intimate alliances with animal exploiting corporations such as Whole Foods, Niman Ranch, and Wolfgang Puck?

And is it not also strange that nearly every adult in America is now aware of their option to buy some sort of “humanely-raised” animal product, an option that is being exercised more and more frequently — yet, at the same time, hardly any Americans are aware of the fact that animal agriculture is estimated by United Nations scientists to be directly responsible for 18% of global warming emissions, and that adopting a plant-based diet saves more carbon pollution than driving a hybrid auto?

What the World Needs Now

Rather than launching a much-needed massive global warming education campaign that teaches people how to transition to a plant-based diet, the Neo-carns have instead elected to commit millions of dollars and countless activist hours to convincing people to buy “happy” animal products linked to largely symbolic legislative initiatives. Possibly voted down, and more than likely to be weakly enforced, such initiatives suffer many potential limitations in terms of the real benefits they might offer animals. Yet, regardless of the outcome, these initiatives are a winner from the word “go” for “happy meat” corporations and Butchers for Animal Rights.

Committing serious resources to the promotion of a plant-based diet, while it may be great for the animals, a moral imperative, and one of the most effective tools for addressing the global warming crisis, isn’t going to sit well with the Neo-carns’ animal industry partners. And let’s face it, it is also unlikely to bring in as many donations as legislative initiatives that aspire to modify animal husbandry practices while introducing the public to new and tastier animal products. Actually confronting and criticizing the use and killing of animals creates some stress, and stress is bad for business.

Consider how the Neo-cons scoffed at the Kyoto Climate Change Treaty, and have failed to push Detroit to develop electric and hybrid vehicles, opting instead to offer tax breaks to buyers of Hummers. Could it be that Neo-carn leaders, enthralled with their newfound ability to conjure one illusory victory after the other, have all but missed the greatest educational opportunity the animal movement has seen in a generation?

Normalizing the Unthinkable

The methods of the Neo-cons and the Neo-carns are often both overwhelming and outrageous, and this tends at first to stun and immobilize those they are attempting to control. Recall, for example, the voting public’s paralysis in the face of the Supreme Court deciding the 2000 election. And then came the difficult and discouraging interval between the run up to the invasion of Iraq and the “Mission Accomplished” moment. More and more people were awakening from the trance, yet still, most of us remained silent, unsure of ourselves, afraid to step out of line and become a target like the Dixie Chicks and others who were the first to say out loud what many of us knew in our hearts to be true.

That's where we are now in the animal movement. "Victory" after "victory" is being declared, and in such a climate, it seems "unpatriotic" to raise any questions or doubts. But the troubling consequences are mounting. It is getting harder and harder to hide the fact that segments of the meat industry are being enriched just like the corporations profiting from the war, and that hard-won progress in the battle for public respect for the rights of animals is slipping away. And as one boundary after another is violated, what was unthinkable and shocking the previous year becomes normal and accepted the next. The relentless quality of the process brings on a kind of learned helplessness.

The Doctrine of Pre-emptive Defeat

So here we come to a crucial point. Neo-cons and Neo-carns both damage the integrity of individuals and society in general by convincing us that we must violate our core principles in order to serve the common good, that by insisting on upholding cherished beliefs and values we are actually impeding progress. We must torture prisoners in order to be safe from attack. We must invade and occupy other countries in order to spread democracy. We must vote for politicians whose policies in nearly every other area are repugnant, because they have promised to support a certain animal welfare bill. We must partner with the animal exploiting industry to promote "happy" animal products even though we know in our hearts that using and killing animals is wrong.

Both the Neo-cons and the Neo-carns offer grim proclamations about the future, creating a climate of despair that enables public acceptance of their radical violations of moral and ethical codes. The Neo-cons, for example, emphasize that the "War on Terror" is likely to go on for generations. They tell us that we must steel ourselves for the nasty business of an unending conflict on many fronts, and that those who insist on questioning their policies are "aiding and abetting the enemy," or "abandoning our troops."

The Neo-carns similarly repeat over and over that "this isn't going to change in our lifetimes," presenting as fact their operating assumption that large numbers of people will not stop eating meat in the foreseeable future. The Neo-carns put forth this doctrine of pre-emptive defeat, and then convince other well-meaning people that their "happy meat" program is the only sane and compassionate course of action. Those who persistently question the wisdom of their approach are likely to be characterized as being "willing to abandon the billions of animals suffering now."

Such intimidating rhetoric distracts our attention from the simple truth that there are other choices, including addressing the root causes, rather than the symptoms of violence and injustice. This begins with the simple act of saying "No," of refusing to participate in the domination and exploitation of others, or to cooperate with those who do.

The Road Not Taken

So what might saying "No" look like? Consider the following excerpts from a 2006 American Psychological Association press release, clarifying the association's position on the issue of torture and abuse:

The Council of Representatives of the American Psychological Association (APA) has approved a resolution reaffirming the organization's absolute opposition to all forms of torture and abuse, regardless of the circumstance.

The Association unequivocally condemns any involvement by psychologists in torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. This APA policy applies to all psychologists in all settings.

The resolution, approved on August 9, 2006, further underscored the duty of all psychologists to intervene to stop acts of torture or abuse as well as the ethical obligation of all psychologists to report such behavior to appropriate authorities.

“Our intention is to empower and encourage members to do everything they can to prevent violations of basic human rights - at Guantanamo Bay or anywhere else they may occur,” said Gerald P. Koocher, PhD, President of the American Psychological Association. “It is not enough for us to express outrage or to codify acceptable practices. As psychologists, we must use every means at our disposal to prevent abuse and other forms of cruel or degrading treatment.”

Contrast this with the language from a letter published on the Whole Foods web site, signed by 17 animal advocacy groups regarding their position on the development and use of “compassionate” standards for animal exploitation:

The undersigned animal welfare, animal protection and animal rights organizations would like to express their appreciation and support for the pioneering initiative being taken by Whole Foods Market in setting Farm Animal Compassionate Standards. We hope and expect that these standards will improve the lives of millions of animals.

As you consider these two approaches, ask yourself what message each sends to the world about the morality of practicing violence against others. Ask yourself which inspires *you* to get involved and take a stand against injustice.

The Journey Home

It is time to stop selling off our movement’s ethical foundations piece by piece in exchange for illusory short-term gains. It is time instead to devote our collective wisdom, energy and resources to creating the nonviolent culture our planet is crying out for. It is time to put our full support behind those developing a nonviolent cuisine, nonviolent clothing, nonviolent art, nonviolent education, nonviolent technology, nonviolent laws, and nonviolent foreign policy.

For the first time in history, human society has the ability to evolve and transform on a planetary scale, and this new ability comes to us at the same time as our collective impact on the world’s ecosystem threatens disaster. Never has the average person had the ability to do so much harm, or so much good. This time of crisis teaches us as never before how profoundly interconnected our lives are, and how we must now cultivate a holistic perspective. We must lift our gaze up from the ground at our feet, and make our decisions while looking much further down the stream of time, at least several generations ahead.

In this larger, longer term view, as great as the problems caused by Neo-conservatism and Neo-carnism may seem to be, they ultimately serve the purpose of awakening a deeper understanding and a

deeper commitment in us all. These inherently flawed ideologies have only gained a foothold because we have allowed our philosophy to be corrupted and our language to be degraded, because we have lost sight of our vision, because we have forgotten who we are. In answering their challenge and regaining our movement's health, we have the chance to rediscover the best parts of ourselves and the most exciting aspect of the human journey — choice.

It's up to us to choose the vision that will shape our world, and the values that will guide us along the way.

Will it be a vision of a “compassionate” seal of approval on every package of animal flesh? Or a vision of every child in America raised on a non-violent diet and receiving a humane education?

Will it be a vision of endless supermarket shelves lined with cage-free eggs? Or a vision of vegan restaurants on every corner, in every town?

Will it be a vision of animal activists collaborating with “kinder, gentler” animal exploiters to cultivate the “sensitive carnivore”? Or a vision of animal activists and former animal farmers joining with environmental and human rights activists to combat violence, hunger, disease, and global warming?

Will it be a compromised, ends-justifies-the-means vision forged upon the assumption of defeat? Or an inspired, confident, long-term vision that fosters peace and planetary transformation?

Our vision is what gives us strength during the darkest times. It is what gives us moral authority when we speak out for the vulnerable. It is what inspires others to become involved. It is what makes our hope for the world more than just a fantasy.

If we faithfully serve our vision, if we fiercely protect and support it, if we defend it from co-option and corruption—then, and only then, will we have a real chance of bringing our vision to life.

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