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Profile

George Soros's Right-Wing Twin

Multibillionaire commodities king Bruce Kovner is the patron saint of the neoconservatives, the new Lincoln Center's crucial Medici, owner of a vast Fifth Avenue mansion—and the most powerful New Yorker you've never heard of.

By Philip Weiss



(Photo credit: Courtesy of Bruce Kovner)

After the opening-night performance of *Tosca* at the Met this spring, a handful of people found their way through a side door of the hall to the narrow corridor that leads backstage. One or two held flowers; a couple were in eveningwear. They were headed for the dressing rooms to congratulate soprano Maria Guleghina, who had just thrown herself from the castle wall. A guard with a clipboard barred the way, checking off names. Everyone passed through, till he came to a bearish figure, a tall, large-boned man with a big head topped by a shock of uncombed silver hair. Yet there was nothing indelicate about him, and if he was not elegant, there was discernment in his smallish light eyes and dark peaked eyebrows.

His name wasn't on the list. The large opera lover repeated it a couple of times—"Kovner"—and even spelled it, but the guard shook his head. There was no help for him. And with a hop of the eyebrows, the pleasant expression never leaving his face, Kovner said thank-you and good night, then turned away, disappearing with his group of friends.

If no one knows anything about Bruce Kovner, it is because he likes it that way. Yet the unassuming manner is camouflage for one of the most powerful people in the country, culturally, financially, and politically. Kovner, 60 years old and divorced, manages the largest hedge fund in the world and every year ratchets higher on the *Forbes* list of the richest Americans (most recently, 106). Wealth has granted him influence in the fields that he finds most interesting: high culture and public policy. As chairman of Juilliard and vice-chairman of Lincoln Center, he is spearheading the project to redevelop West 65th Street, to turn Lincoln Center "inside out." He has said he will throw in \$25 million or so of his own to kick-start the construction. Meantime, across the park, for his private delectation, he bought the former International Center of Photography mansion on Fifth Avenue and 94th Street for \$17 million and over five years has spent upwards of \$10 million remaking the historic brick mansion into a single-family residence, with a two-story bedroom, a media room, a book vault in the basement to house his collection of rare European illustrated books, eighteen water closets, and one bidet.

As Kovner makes his way through the city, so does he consume the nation. He's a neoconservative godfather. He is among the backers of the Manhattan Institute and the fledgling right-wing daily the *New York Sun*.

Most important, Kovner is chairman of the American Enterprise Institute. The right-wing think tank has supplied the government with the most powerful ideas in foreign policy in a generation, a vision of a supremely idealistic and militaristic American empire that must carry democracy out from its shores by force and begin by remaking the Middle East. In a speech at AEI, George W. Bush thanked the tank for supplying him more brains than any other organization, nearly twenty, including Dick Cheney, who is said to be close to Kovner, and John Bolton, the fireman's son who wants to raise his voice in the corridors of the United Nations. As well as many of the architects of America's Iraq policy, from Richard Perle to David Frum to Michael Rubin to David Wurmser. When these men (and at least one woman, Lynne Cheney) have not worked for Bush, they have found a prominent platform a few blocks away in the

sleek AEI building. This is perhaps Bruce Kovner's signal (and shared) achievement: to underwrite what had been extreme ideas and bring them into mainstream discourse.

"No one has ever developed the machinery that can drive the approach to public policy that the right has—a strategic, disciplined approach to policy formation," says Rob Stein, founder of the Democracy Alliance, who is trying to create such a network on the other side. "I think Bruce has certain values but not a detailed agenda," says Robert Samuelson, the *Newsweek* and *Washington Post* columnist who has known Kovner since college. "My impression is that he believes it is healthy for the country to have people who crudely share his values in the dialogue. He is doing this for very good reasons. He is not self-interested, except maybe psychologically."

Now and then, Kovner's spending is directly political; last year, he spent a lot to reelect President Bush. But his main interest has been quietly strategic: the idea factory. "Bruce is an intellectual. He understands the world of ideas," says Norman Podhoretz, the legendary editor of *Commentary*, who gave Kovner his start as a writer. "He would have been supremely well qualified to be an active member of that [academic] world had circumstances moved him in that direction. And what distinguishes him from most intellectuals is that he is also brilliant."

Intellect (and not money) is the gold thread in Kovner's story. A star student at Harvard who could not finish his doctorate, he redeployed his knowledge of government to make billions in international commodities. Now he lavishes his money on the hurdy-gurdies of influence in Washington.

But again there is his outward manner: self-erasing. His press has been mostly limited to financial journals. "Do you know Bruce Kovner? You should," *Fortune* asked two years back in an article headlined THE \$11 BILLION MAN. Kovner wouldn't talk to the magazine; he has declined all but a couple of interview requests. Notwithstanding a series of grand and public gestures, like his restoration of the Georgian palace on the park where he can toss his socks farther than most people go for the *Times* and coffee, and his sybarite's love of good restaurants, from Nobu to The Four Seasons (where he showed up a few years ago with Renée Fleming as his date), Kovner has nothing to say publicly. A few years back, he co-signed an op-ed piece on school choice in the *Times*. The only other statements on which you will find his name are the hundreds of soft-green NO TRESPASSING signs that mark the borders of a sprawling estate in Dutchess County.



Kovner, Julliard's chairman, at an event.(Photo credit: Patrick McMullan)

On a day in June, a bunch of workers toiled to make a Gulliver-size berm on the north side of the property, to keep the exotic trees and water features of Kovner's land from the view of the state road. Kovner is very private. Friends use words like *secretive*, *shy*, and *humble*. The editor of *The American Enterprise* magazine apologizes for mentioning Kovner when he touches on him in an article about the cerebral style of finance. A socialite who encounters him at the opera is surprised by his schlumpy dress and regular-guy mien: "You'd never know he's a jillionaire." "One of his distinguishing characteristics is humility," says Thomas Carroll, president of the Foundation for Education Reform and Accountability. "If you meet him on the street, you would never know who he was. There's no fanfare, no pomposity, no effort to get people's attention."

"Bruce is not the kind of guy who is going to be up on the stage with anybody," says Floyd Flake, the minister and former congressman. "He's more likely to be in the background."

As I discovered. A few days after dropping a letter at the Park Avenue offices of his hedge fund saying that I was writing about him and wanted his help, Kovner sent me a charming e-mail titled "There must be a better topic." The

body of the note, which was all in lowercase, contained a hint of flirtation. He had been racking his brains to think of better articles for me. "The 900th piece on The Donald or something about vampy conservative commentators—anyone, pls, but me!"

Neoconservatism's crèche was, famously, the Trotskyite alcove of the City College lunchroom in the forties. Disillusioned by communism, the neocons went to work in academia and at intellectual journals, and then burst onto the American stage in the seventies, when they opposed the idea of any negotiation with the Soviet Union, the evil empire that has given way, over time, to the axis of evil.

Bruce Stanley Kovner was born too late for City College— February 1945—but his own family history recapitulates the arc of the neocons.

Kovner's grandfather Nathan, along with Nathan's brother Benjamin, came to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, from Vilna, Russia, in the early 1900s because they were revolutionary socialists who feared arrest by the czar. "They were atheists. They were fleeing religion as much as they were fleeing the czar," Kovner's cousin Pat Kovner says of her ancestors.

In the only statements Kovner has made about his background, to the *Wall Street Journal* fourteen years ago, he said that his family was full of socialists. The word favored by some of his relatives is *communist*. Two of his father's cousins were accused of being communists in the labor movement and were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the fifties. Both pleaded the Fifth. Pat Kovner, the daughter of one of them (Julius), remembers, "It was a terrible time of repression and people losing their jobs and being humiliated in public. People were frightened to death." A few weeks after Congress accused Bruce Kovner's cousin once removed, Fay Kovner Mukes, of heading the "Hollywood Communist Club," her lawyer flew out to represent the Rosenbergs in their last-minute appeals before the Supreme Court, shortly before they were executed in June 1953.

In that year, too, Bruce Kovner's father, Isidore "Moishe" Kovner, a union mechanical engineer, moved his wife, Sophie, and four children from Brooklyn to the working-class community of the San Fernando Valley. Moishe is said to have been more conservative than his communist cousins. He crossed a picket line to work in an aircraft factory during World War II. "He was visiting at [his cousin] Julius's house, and when Julius found out he was a scab, he threw him out and said, 'I want nothing to do with you,' " says cousin Fay. "It was the time of 'Which side are you on?'" Pat Kovner says.

The Kovners were big, physical men. Moishe Kovner played pro football for a time. Moishe's older brother, Sam, known as "Big Sam," was a player in the Jewish underworld. "Kovner was perspiring freely," the *Times* reported of a day in 1941 when the police caught him in a midtown hotel and ordered him to open a door. " 'Not me,' he pleaded. 'When that door opens, the Killer'll start shooting.' " Sam pulled a long stretch in Sing Sing—"the only member of the family who went to music school," cousin Abraham Kovner says jokingly.

Notwithstanding the colorful lumpen activities of his father's generation, Bruce Kovner was to join that great Jewish migration we call the meritocracy. He became a Cub Scout, later a Merit scholar. At 15, he was the youngest member of the Van Nuys High School "Knowledge Bowl" team, and at 16, the student-body president. Pictures in the *Valley News* show a much broader smile than he has today. But he already possessed the nerveless temperament that has served him in finance. He won one game for the Wolfpups basketball team by scoring the last five points, the margin of victory, by shooting five of seven from the free-throw line.

Kovner entered Harvard College in 1962, and former classmates describe him as introverted and thoughtful, but also as a "regular guy" with a good sense of humor, someone who didn't stand out. It was still the fifties culturally. "We wore coats and ties to all meals. Some guys had clip-on ties. We married our girlfriends," says Dr. Gary Chase. "Bruce stuck with the same girl for most of college." Kovner's girl was a Radcliffe classmate, Mary Wissler, a quietly sharp blonde with softly pretty features who was a reporter for the school paper. She ended up marrying Donald Graham, now chairman of the Washington Post Company.

Kovner's picture in his college yearbook shows a striking and powerful face, but Kovner's eyes are dark and abstracted. One friend says he was "lonely." Between his junior and senior years, he had lost his mother, Sophie, at 47—she had hanged herself in the family's Van Nuys house on a Monday morning in August, according to California State vital records—and he was setting out on what would turn out to be ten years of uncertainty and, by his own description, "floating." In that interval, Kovner tried three different fields and failed in all.



The leading choice, at a time when there were still student deferments from the Vietnam draft, was the academy. At grad school at Harvard, Kovner was the star student of a prominent conservative, Edward C. Banfield, a Harvard professor and father figure whom Kovner has called (in Lois Peltz's book *The New Investment Superstars*) the biggest influence on his life. A tall and slightly clumsy man wearing outside horn-rimmed glasses and fiercely devoted to the life of ideas, Banfield had been in Roosevelt's New Deal farm administration, but he became disillusioned with



Kovner's mansion on Fifth. (Photo credit: James Leynse)

big government. Banfield schooled Kovner in independence and intellectual honesty, he has said. He joined a network that included Daniel Patrick Moynihan and James Q. Wilson. He was a regular at the Banfield farm in Vermont and helped his mentor on what would turn out to be his most famous work, *The Unheavenly City* (1970), which argues that idealistic government programs can only do so much to help the lower class.

"Ed explicitly or implicitly treated Bruce like he would be a great academic star. Like James Q. Wilson," Samuelson recalls. "It was so obvious that Bruce was not ordinarily bright. And he was articulate. There were people whose thought processes were not organized. This was not true of Bruce. He could see and understand political relationships that would pass right by other people. He was a superstar. I would say to myself, *Why can't I be like him?*"

Conservative theorists were taken up with the question of whether government planning had any real effect, and Kovner had a sharp idea: to study the role of the

Council of Economic Advisers in economic policy-making. "I was puzzled and astonished that he didn't finish his thesis," Samuelson says. "I thought he could throw it off in a couple of weeks." *The American Enterprise* magazine says Kovner experienced "a fit of writer's block." It would seem that he set impossibly high standards for his work. As he told his Harvard classmates, in a 25th-anniversary report that he wrote with self-lacerating wit, he found that he was a "better consumer of great works than a creator of them."

Other paths also trailed off into dissatisfaction. Kovner worked on political campaigns but found that the "intrigues and dissimulations" of politics were more attractive in theory than in practice. He took courses at the Juilliard school as a harpsichordist and pianist, but his high standards blocked his progress. He was a bad pianist, he has said, a dabbler—a verdict that close friends who have heard him play say is incorrect. He became a music writer. Kovner met Podhoretz while visiting his friend the writer Edward Jay Epstein in the Hamptons, and though Podhoretz, a classical-music aficionado, disagreed with Kovner on the subject of Jascha Heifetz, he hired him as his music critic. Kovner published several "undistinguished but highbrow magazine articles," as he would later say with his perfect pitch for the self-put-down.

Kovner described himself as a "writer" when he got married, at 28 in 1973, to an artist, Sarah Peter, in a Jewish ceremony in Connecticut. They moved to 57th between Eighth and Ninth, and he found a writer's job: He drove a cab. "He told me that his wife was not exactly thrilled by that turn of events," says Kovner's friend Lionel Tiger, the anthropologist and author. This is the one point to which Sarah Peter responded, in a postcard she sent to me declining to be interviewed: "For the record . . . it's incorrect that I was annoyed with him driving a cab."

Intellect, not money, is the gold thread in the Kovner story. A Harvard-grad-school dropout, he redeployed his knowledge of government to make billions in commodities, and now spends it freely to influence Washington.

Her husband was suffering "vocational adolescence," he would confess to his Harvard class. "I wondered if I was going to fulfill every Jewish mother's fear that her son will turn into nothing but a bum," he wrote (a curious turn of phrase, for the report was in 1991, 26 years after his mother's suicide). By then, he had struck on a new course. "Somebody," he would say, had introduced him to the commodities markets, and with the same thoroughness that he had studied government texts, he was staying up nights studying commodities—"devising paradigms and models, simulations, and scenarios." He borrowed \$3,000 against a MasterCard, and tried out his ideas in copper and interest-rate futures.

In the mid-sixties, an MIT Ph.D. named Helmut Weymar, who had written his dissertation on the cocoa market and was working as a cocoa-products buyer for candy companies, came to understand that he would be better off if he traded the commodity himself and so set about to gather colleagues to study commodities, a commodity to a man, in a stone farmhouse in Princeton. After a bloodcurdling start in which he and his brainy samurai lost nearly half their capital in one six-week spiral, they absorbed the hardest lesson about markets—discipline—and over the next eight years averaged an 85 percent return per annum—the *Ur*-hedge fund. The methods they pioneered, including computerized trading and a satellite dish in the countryside, have become mainstream: Commodities Corp., the company they founded, is now part of Goldman Sachs.

One of Weymar's best hires was a former psychology grad student at Clark University named Michael Marcus, an overflowing character with a highly attuned sense of irony who performed so well that by late 1976, he was told he could hire an assistant. Marcus put an ad in the financial press, and then he called his boss on the phone: "Helmut, I have in my office the next president of Commodities Corp."

"He brings Bruce in, and as far as I was concerned, it was love at first sight," Weymar recalls. "He was just a very impressive person. He has a natural, wonderful way about him. As much as anything, it's his sense of humor. The eye-opener was when he said he was part-time music critic for *Commentary* magazine. I really value richness in intellect, and Bruce was rich up the kazoo. We had to hire the guy on the spot."

They hired him not as an assistant but as a trader, and in time, Marcus blew fairy dust on Kovner's large head, telling him that he could make a million dollars. Kovner came to believe him, and it was not long before he was making much more than that for Commodities Corp.'s investors.

In 1991, Kovner described these developments to his Harvard classmates in an understated manner that seems to reveal his inner sense of grandeur by mocking it. "Then I did find something. I found out that I understood financial markets . . . True, I was still broke, but something seemed to be coming together . . . What happened after that was, well, improbable. I started making money, and quickly . . ."

Marcus would tell another Commodities Corp. alumnus, Jack Schwager, author of *Market Wizards, Interviews With Top Traders*, that Kovner's objectivity made him great. "If you can find somebody who is really open to seeing anything, then you have found the raw ingredient of a good trader—and I saw that in Bruce right away." Weymar told me that one of the most important qualities of a trader is ego strength, the self-confidence that allows a person to acknowledge his mistakes and not fall in love with his ideas. "The biggest risk in trading is hubris." This is because being wrong is actually an integral part of success. A successful futures trader makes many more losing trades than winning ones. The key is to recognize and concede the mistakes and cut losses. And ride the winners.

In 1983, Kovner went solo, and before long, his hedge fund's winnings became legend on the Street. Partly to dispel the talk, Kovner gave the most expansive interview he has given, in 1989, to Schwager for *Market Wizards*, and explained that his gifts were vision and discipline. "I have the ability to imagine configurations of the world different from today and really believe it can happen. I can imagine that soybean prices can double or that the dollar can fall to 100 yen. Second, I stay rational and disciplined under pressure. . . . When something happens to disturb my emotional equilibrium and my sense of what the world is like, I close out all positions related to that event." Kovner said he had seen other traders come up with better ideas, but they put too much money on them.

His style of trading is described as global or macro. His game board is the world, and he draws on his political understanding, a sense of what the Finance minister of New Zealand or Britain will do or not do to protect his currency. (Of course, he sometimes knows these ministers; he hangs out with them at the Bilderberg conference.) Another time he and an associate cornered the market on two-year Treasury bonds (resulting in an SEC investigation). He bought oil tankers so that he could get a better idea of the flows of oil and kept a photo of one of them on his wall. "Lee Raymond [chairman and CEO of Exxon Mobil] has a lot more information about oil at Exxon than Bruce does. But I don't think he has done better than Bruce," says the trader Michael Holland. (By the way, Raymond is vice-chairman of the American Enterprise Institute.)

Kovner has reclaimed his soul in the traditional way of the world-beater: in the arts. He gives money to Juilliard, the National Theatre of London, and the Israel Philharmonic. But his love is the most private of arts: books. He named his hedge fund Caxton, after the first printer of books in English, in the fifteenth century, and his own collection is said to include obscure illustrated works from Eastern Europe. His former wife produced books of exquisite drawings on fine paper (the one held by the New York Public Library is refined past most tastes: pictures of 36 plates of food, mainly desserts, during a nine-month, seventeen-country family trip around the world in 1992–93). But other books he has financed have been more weighty. In 1985, at a book party at the old Gotham Book Mart for a Truman Capote story, Kovner said to the artist whose paintings were in the book, "Is there something you really want to do that you have never been able to do?" "Yeah, a Bible. But I don't think I'm old enough or wise enough to do it," Barry Moser responded. A few years later, Moser, a lapsed preacher, sought Kovner out, and Kovner agreed to finance what has proved to be a historic edition of the Bible, the Pennyroyal Caxton, with 232 of Moser's wood engravings. Over five years, Kovner spent about \$2 million on the Bible, searching out the finest papers and finest bindery. "He never once told me what to do," says Moser. "I said, 'What kind of input do you want?' 'None,' he said. And he is a man of books. But I did put him in the book. He is the face of King Solomon," Moser says, laughing. The image is of a big, wry, salty man with a giant forehead and those devilish eyebrows. Moser drew it from pictures he got from a friend. "His friends call Bruce 'The Rabbi,'" says Claudia Cohen, who bound the Bibles. And Lionel Tiger, who has a house in Dutchess County not far from Kovner's 200-acre spread, says, "He's just a sweetie. He is a big, fuzzy, warm uncle."

Kovner's relationship to Moser is similar to Kovner's relationship to Liz Diller, the high-toned architect of the redesign of Lincoln Center. Diller's work has an experimental, progressive quality, combining experimental theater, installations, and provocative gestures. When she offered her plan to take Lincoln Center off its plinth and into the real world of the West Side, she thought she would lose out to more sober visions. But Kovner, who was the head of the group of seven institutions in the West 65th Street portion of the plan, got behind her, and got others behind her.

"We are opening up Lincoln Center to the city, making it porous, turning it inside out, eroding its edges," Diller says, sipping tea from a graduated beaker in her downtown studio. "I think Bruce would articulate it in the same way. It's an ideal he shared about the project. He is extremely respectful of our views as architects. He's the best of what a client can be. He steps back, lets us have our space, but at the same time detects weakness with surgical precision."

"How democratic can Lincoln Center be?" I ask. "The last time I walked down the steps off Milstein Plaza, there were all these LaGuardia High School kids sitting there with their knapsacks all over the place."

"It will be a self-editing place," Diller says coolly. "A kind of urban bucolic . . . a park like the MoMA sculpture garden. . . I think it's going to be a contemplative place. You don't think of sharing those places usually with other people."

Her studio has a communal feel. Empowered assistants mill about. Over Diller's shoulder, you can see a bulletin board on which somebody clever has tacked up a number of photos of George Bush. The president's head is interspersed with ape heads. Or he is giving someone the finger. Or he holds up three fingers and a speech-bubble says FOUR MORE YEARS.

"Do you ever talk politics?"

"We talk ideas. Politics never comes up. The democratizing politics of Lincoln Center, that comes up."

Kovner is so downbeat, culturally, that you might say that he lives blue but thinks red. Three weeks before the election last fall, Kovner (and the woman he is said to be dating, Amy Stevens, weekend editor of the *Wall Street Journal*) showed up on Tenth Avenue for a party for *The Surrender*, that paean to anal sex by former Balanchine dancer Toni Bentley. His former wife is also of a feminist bent. Sarah Peter somewhat undid what her former husband did for Bush by making large contributions to John Kerry and to Emily's List and to just about any Democratic female candidate for Congress. Political gifts by the couple's second child, Katherine, a 22-year-old theater director lately working in London's East End, were very similar to her mother's.

It goes without saying that a wide gulf separates the *Surrender* party from the American Enterprise Institute, whose female residents offer grating lectures on the evils of feminism, therapy, and *The Vagina Monologues*, where Robert Bork heaps abuse on *Roe v. Wade*.

Lionel Tiger explains that Kovner defies labeling. "He is an interesting counter-cultural figure. He is right in the center of the culture, and he doesn't do anything you're supposed to do. . . . His work with Juilliard is unpolitical, unprogrammable, selfless, and based in human joy."

I say, "Transparent he isn't. He never publishes his views."

"You mean book after book, sponsoring presidential campaign after presidential campaign? Bruce had the opportunity as a graduate student to go the transparent route. And he chose to sit glumly in a taxicab rather than make pronouncements to the Harvard School of Government, which could make anyone crazy. I don't think for Bruce there is a distinction between ideas and action."

Kovner's take on his activities is witty and elusive. "None of this is what I expected to do when I imagined my life in 1966, but it could have been worse," he told his Harvard classmates. For all the charm, no one gets too intimate with the man the *Post* has called "the Hedge King." Barry Moser describes Kovner as a close friend. Yet he never talks politics with his buddy (generally it's art and girls). He produced a Bible with Kovner and toured Jerusalem with him, but apart from historical discussions of religious events, draws a blank on the question of Kovner's religion. Says another friend, "I have never seen the Jewish-culture aspect of Bruce. I would guess that he is basically agnostic."

Chairman Kovner, like his communist ancestors, has always had empowering visions—able to imagine configurations of the world different from today.

Some say he is humble. Tiger corrects me. "I don't think he's cultivated any functional modesty. When he needed a two-bedroom, he bought the ICP building on Fifth Avenue. He is not reclusive. He is not Howard Hughes. He has a large appetite for beautiful things."

Another close associate also brought up the historic house, which was built in 1915 for Willard and Dorothy Whitney Straight. "Humble? Are you kidding, when he buys that house? Bruce is—the Fed used a word for the long bond the other day that describes Bruce. A conundrum. What is a conundrum?"

"A puzzle, a riddle."

"That is Bruce."

Rumors befitting a Jewish Gatsby abound with Kovner. New York Supreme Court minutes indicate that at the same time she served her husband with divorce papers in January 1998, Sarah Peter produced the affidavit of an investigator. Then Kovner bought his giant bachelor pad, and as renovations dragged on for years, including the restoration of the correct historical mortar color and bronze shutter hardware, the *Times* printed a neighbor's rumor that he was providing an entire floor for his beloved dogs—which may have come out of the counterculture-style name of the limited corporation that owns the building, Three Dogs.

Some delay in construction might be laid to changes. In the year after 9/11, architects' drawings filed with the Buildings Department were revised in one crucial respect. The big study on the fourth floor was now sheathed with "lead-lined plywood" and called a "CBR Room." I Googled that acronym. Chemical Biological Radiation: a safe room against a dirty bomb.

Behind a shimmering façade of marble a few blocks from the White House, the American Enterprise Institute in late June hosted a forum on the Middle East with a very specific aim: to put forward a new claim for Israel's right to hold territory in the West Bank. Two right-wing Israelis made the presentation. They were supported in their view by two former members of the Bush administration now lodged at Bruce Kovner's D.C. hostelry, Richard Perle and Michael Rubin.

It was a typical affair at the conservative think tank. Rubin kicked off the panel by congratulating the Bush administration on its "success" in Iraq. Perle harked back to his neoconservative father figure, Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Washington State, in laying Israel's claim to "Judea and Samaria," as Perle put it, using biblical terms for the West Bank. Dore Gold, a former Israeli ambassador, loudly denounced the idea that the September 11 attacks were in any way motivated by anger over American policy in the occupied territories. "It's a myth out there that somehow the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is related to the rage of radical Islam toward the West."

The panel was a tour de force, though at times it seemed less than straightforward. "We don't bring our disagreements to Washington; we leave them in Israel," Gold commented to a more-liberal Israeli in the audience after leaving the stage. According to federal filings dug up by Guidestar.org, Gold is paid nearly \$100,000 a year by the American Enterprise Institute.

Bruce Kovner would never raise his voice in the provocative manner of that morning's panel, but he has continually underwritten hard-right ideas, giving them legitimacy in political discourse. Lefties may dominate discussions in universities and New York dinner parties, but neocons never fade into that distance. They hang around Pennsylvania Avenue.

Kovner, over two decades, has underwritten the infrastructure the neocons have used to achieve their current prominence. On the fifth floor of the AEI building, the Project for the New American Century helped lay the ground for the Iraq war by regular statements describing Saddam Hussein as the greatest threat to peace in the Middle East. The *Sun* ran an editorial asserting that people protesting the Iraq war were committing treason, while AEI's Perle and David Frum published *An End to Evil*, in which they argued that extreme Islam wants to dominate the world, and the U.S. faces "victory or holocaust." The U.S. should show as little compunction about "destroying regimes" as a police sniper feels icing a hostage-taker. When George Bush was elected in 2000, Dick Cheney swept in a raft of neoconservative thinkers, many from AEI.

"Neoconservatism is a career," says Scott McConnell, editor of *American Conservative*. "One thing neocons have that both other factions of conservatives and liberals don't have is they can employ a lot of people. AEI provides a seat for the kind of mid-level intellectuals who can produce op-ed pieces. It's 50 to 100 people with decent prose styles, or Ph.D.'s, and they form a critical mass. They help create the reality of being the dominant strain of conservatism."

Kovner's relationship to AEI is the same as his relationship to all his causes: lordly. He plays visionary and psychiatrist to the AEI board. "He's brilliant," says Perle. "He's intellectually rigorous, balanced, and thoughtful."

These are the same attributes that Kovner brought to Lincoln Center. Rebecca Robertson, who heads the redevelopment project, recalls that at a crucial meeting of a working group of seven arts organizations that took place some months after 9/11, Kovner said, "I know it seems like the world's falling apart—well, there is no better time to keep your head down and plan."

James Q. Wilson, a member of the AEI board, says that Kovner has pushed AEI to build an endowment so that scholars are more independent, so they don't have to hunt up grants for their work. Kovner's hedge fund manages the lion's share of the group's investments, which grew from \$28 million to \$40 million in 2003, the latest year collected by

[Guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org).

Try to pin down Kovner's pals on any brilliant idea that Kovner has had, and they squirt away. Though, yes, one told me that his positions on public policy were "fairly extreme."

Kovner would never speak in the "victory or holocaust" manner that the drones in his idea factory have perfected. He has never liked the hurly-burly of politics, and money has allowed him to rise above that mess. Yet there can be no question that he supports the militarist neoconservative agenda. Last October, when George Bush's chestnuts were in the fire, Kovner helped to pull them out. He wrote checks for \$110,000 to a 527 called Softer Voices that was aimed at "security moms" in swing states. Softer Voices is led by, among others, the writer Midge Decter, the wife of Norman Podhoretz, and Nina Rosenwald, a force in the pro-Israel lobby. Kovner was its largest financial backer.

For all his reserved sagacity, Bruce Kovner has always been comfortable with radical ideas. Understanding the Kovner communists of the forties and fifties and their scene is a key to understanding the neocons and their scene. As there is today, there was talk then of cabals and fellow travelers. Both causes were heavily Jewish. The ideas of both the neoconservatives and the communists were Utopian and revolutionary. Neocons would carry the torch of democratic revolution out into the world, with scant attention paid to the disparate natures of the affected societies. Communists had a similarly inflexible global revolutionary ideology.

Chairman Kovner has always had empowering visions—able to imagine configurations of the world different from today. And under the fuzzy rabbi he's a cold number. Daddy darkness, huddled in his safe room.

As I worked to research this story, Bruce Kovner came and went, always light on his feet. "Well, if you really mean to do this, I'll try not to hide under a rock," he said at the start, adding that while he wouldn't be quoted, he might sit down with me and talk things over.

A week or two passed, and I sent him a note saying that the article was going to be about his mind, that I wished to gain a sense of his ideas and values over time. He replied ten days later: "Denial has its limits, and procrastination too, so I thought I'd better respond to your last e-mail."

Kovner said I should call him, and if we could agree on ground rules we could have some type of interview. He would clear time for me. We had a phone conversation. He described his concern about ideological agendas in journalism; he said that he wished to work in a positive way. I gained the impression that everyone I had talked to gave me: that of a thoughtful, unpretentious, and highly reserved person, a man with a musical voice and a self-effacing manner who wanted to be seen as nice. He also seemed to be protesting too much, to be conflicted about the attention. "Anyone else but me," he had said. Well, then, why didn't he banish me?

I offered to write down the things I wanted to ask him about, so I dropped off a letter setting forth my interests, from his family's socialist background to dating Mary Wissler in college, to religion and real estate.

A day or two after that, I saw Kovner at the Manhattan Institute's annual Alexander Hamilton dinner at Cipriani. He sat at one of the head tables. Others took credit and gave one another awards, but his name was mentioned only once. Still, he looked the Medici at Table 2, huge and smiling, hugging friends as they came off the stage. One of them, Richard Gilder, told me as he left the hall that Kovner had become a "huge force."

"He is not reclusive, not Howard Hughes. He has a large appetite for beautiful things."

Surely Kovner is one of the most powerful intellectuals in the country. But unlike most intellectuals, he does not have to defend his views. And his wealth has made him the 800-pound gorilla. He does whatever he likes. I'd raised that question in my letter. Does he feel any degree of public accountability for his political activities?

He was leaving the hall when I went up and introduced myself.

Kovner took an informal tone. We were just two guys. "You know, you wrote me a really scary letter. You know more about me than the last three women I've gone out with."

"Well, maybe they'll buy the magazine," I said.

He laughed, the eyebrows hopped once. "No. I'm going to send them out of the country . . ."

Then, saying, "We have to talk," he bid me good night and sailed out into the spring night. Our flirtation continued for a couple more e-mails before he closed the door. It was one thing to get together to chat about the homely interests he and I share—dogs, trees, Dutchess County, and a little policy—but quite another to talk about himself. He was a

private person, and he wished me well.


The secrecy with the girlfriends, the refusal to talk to the press, the tragic family history, the neocon vision of the world, the awkward back-and-forth with me, the lead-lined room—I got the sense that Kovner was, like all geniuses, a nutty one. His nuttiness was paranoia.

On a weekend six weeks after 9/11, a dark blanket of security fell over eastern Dutchess County, and the Taconic Parkway was shut down so that Dick Cheney, a friend and colleague of Kovner's from AEI's board, could visit the neighborhood of Kovner's estate. Rumor had it he was skeet-shooting. The vice-president's office repeatedly declined to answer my question: Was he visiting Kovner?

The hedge king's country borders are heavily defended. The shapely wooden gates are all locked. The berms keep the curious from glimpsing the glades and rock walls and water features that visitors have said lie inside. Still, it appears that "Altamont Farms" is even more impressive than Kovner's pied-à-terre. You can see the hilltop manor house from the road, and something else that seems brick Federalist, something else in Carpenter Gothic. Then there is the "Glass House Complex," a stunning array of large greenhouses adjoined by a barn and the head gardener's residence. The spread is the best answer there is to Kovner's revolutionary Russian grandfather, for it is Tolstoyan in scope. Neighbors talk of his indifference to invitations from the horsey set, even as he brings in trailer-truckloads of exotic trees and plants. It is always the same story with him: lordly, vast, abstract, and ringed by fear.

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