

Being 60 Minutes Means You Never Have to Say You are Sorry - Except Once

By Andrew J. Weaver and Fred W. Kandler

Sixty minutes executive producer Don Hewitt appeared on the December 2, 2002, edition of Larry King Live (CNN) and was asked whether he regretted any shows that he had done in his 36-year career. Hewitt named only one, the 1983 60 Minutes double segment on the National Council of Churches and World Council of Churches. Hewitt told King that:

“We once took off on the National Council of Churches as being left wing and radical and a lot of nonsense. And the next morning I got a congratulatory phone call from every redneck bishop in America and I thought, oh, my God, we must have done something wrong last night, and I think we probably did.”

The broadcast on CBS's 60 Minutes entitled “The Gospel According to Whom” began with Roman Catholic priest, Richard John Neuhaus, saying, “I am worried - I am outraged when the church lies to its own people.” The camera moved from an offering plate in a United Methodist church in the Midwest to images of the Cuban dictator Fidel Castro and then to marchers in Communist Red Square. The lengthy segment over and over suggested that the National Council of Churches (NCC) was using Sunday offerings to promote Marxist revolution.

The most damaging accusation in the program was that NCC had somehow funded armed insurgents in Zimbabwe. While showing horrific footage of a slain missionary, the program implied that the NCC was responsible for the brutal murder. It was a lie that the top rated show in television told to tens of millions. The broadcast was highly damaging to mainline Protestants and the NCC.

At the same time the program gave momentum to a fledging Washington “think tank,” The Institute on

Religion and Democracy (IRD), nearly 90% funded by right-wing benefactors like Richard Mellon Scaife and the Smith-Richardson Foundation. The IRD was a primary source of the false and reckless claims made by the 60 Minutes segments.

Founded in 1981 by several key leaders of the neoconservative movement including Roman Catholics Michael Novak and Father Richard John Neuhaus it has relentlessly used propagandist methods to carry out the radical political agenda of a handful of secular benefactors bent on neutralizing and overturning the social justice tradition of mainline Protestant churches as well as the NCC.

Attacks by IRD on the NCC and its constituent churches are meant to discredit the legitimacy of their democratic bodies and support imposition of strict dogma and autocratic governance. This tactic is often on view when the conservative “renewal” factions in mainline denominations work with the IRD to foment internal dissent and generate conflict. In some cases, unaware theologically conservative Christians seeking spiritual renewal are used by the IRD and the “renewal” factions for hardball political power designs.

The question remains, why would secular political operatives care about funding a multi-million dollar attack on mainline churches and the NCC? Think about this: NCC church members' influence is disproportionate to their numbers and include remarkably high numbers of leaders in politics, business, and culture. The prevailing ethos of American culture has been shaped by the leadership and membership of these churches. Moreover, these churches are some of the largest land owners in the U.S., with hundreds of billions of dollars collectively in assets. A hostile takeover of these churches would represent a massive shift in American culture, power and wealth for a relatively small investment. If this sounds far-fetched, one need only consider how right-wing groups during recent decades have taken over and now wholly control the Southern Baptist Convention.

One of the most troubling aspects of the IRD is that, while powerful figures in the right-wing of the Roman Catholic Church have been among its leaders from its inception, there is no program, staff

or budget for changing the Catholic Church. There are only programs, staff and budget for changing Protestant churches. At the same time, 6 of the 17 current members of the board of directors, a full 35 percent are prominent conservative Catholics. They include founders Father Richard John Neuhaus of the American Enterprise Institute and Michael Novak of The Institute on Religion and Public Life, along with Professor Robert P. George of Princeton University, George Weigel of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Mary Ellen Bork (wife of Judge Robert Bork) and the chair of the board, Professor J. Budziszewski of the University of Texas at Austin.

These prominent Catholics who direct the IRD's board have conferred their prestige and considerable influence on an organization that has consistently labored to generate suspicion and hostility about Christian leaders who are not in their communion. This is not acceptable among responsible people of faith. Don Hewitt at 60 minutes said he was sorry. We are still waiting for the leaders at IRD to say they are sorry.

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