

PART III

Neoconservatism

CHAPTER FIVE

The
Neoconservative
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The Neoconservative Conspiracy

The longer the United States struggles to impose order in postwar Iraq, the harsher indictments of the George W. Bush administration's foreign policy are becoming. "Acquiring additional burdens by engaging in new wars of liberation is the last thing the United States needs," declared one Bush critic in *Foreign Affairs*. "The principal problem is the mistaken belief that democracy is a talisman for all the world's ills, and that the United States has a responsibility to promote democratic government wherever in the world it is lacking."¹

Does this sound like a Democratic pundit bashing Bush for partisan gain? Quite the contrary. The swipe came from Dimitri Simes, president of the Nixon Center and copublisher of *National Interest*. Simes is not alone in calling on the administration to reclaim the party's pre-Reagan heritage—to abandon the moralistic, Wilsonian, neoconservative dream of exporting democracy and return to a more limited and realistic foreign policy that avoids the pitfalls of Iraq.

1. Dimitri K. Simes, "America's Imperial Dilemma," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2003): 97, 100.

In fact, critics on the Left and Right are remarkably united in their assessment of the administration. Both believe a neoconservative cabal has hijacked the administration's foreign policy and has now overplayed its hand. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, for example, Anatol Lieven observed, "If the plans of the neocons depended on mass support for imperialism within the U.S., they would be doomed to failure. The attacks of 11 September, however, have given American imperialists the added force of wounded nationalism . . . strengthened by the Israeli nationalism of much of the American Jewish community."² "Long after the new fundamentalist thinking fades away," wrote G. John Ikenberry, "American diplomats will be repairing the damaged relations and political disarray it wrought."³ Others see Bush as a mere puppet: "Now here we are on the downslope of 2003," wrote Alexander Cockburn in the *Nation*, "and George Bush is learning, way too late for his own good, that the neocons have been matchlessly wrong about everything."⁴ "The neoconservatives . . . are largely responsible for getting us into the war against Iraq," observed Elizabeth Drew in the *New York Review of Books*.⁵ George Soros, a Holocaust survivor, detected a "supremacist ideology" in the White House, while novelist Arundhati Roy warned that for the "first time in history, a single empire with an arsenal of weapons that could obliterate the world in an afternoon has complete, unipolar, economic and military hegemony."⁶

On the paleoconservative Right, Patrick J. Buchanan, editor of

2. Anatol Levin, "A Trap of Their Own Making," *London Review of Books* (May 8, 2003): 19.

3. G. John Ikenberry, "The End of the Neo-Conservative Moment," *Survival* (Spring 2004): 7.

4. Alexander Cockburn, "Behold, the Head of a Neocon!" *The Nation* (September 17, 2003): 8.

5. Elizabeth Drew, "The Neocons in Power," *New York Review of Books* (June 12, 2003): 20.

6. Arundhati Roy, "The New American Century," *The Nation* (February 9, 2004): 11.

the *American Conservative* and a longtime foe of the neoconservatives, asserted that Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, among others, have formed an alien cabal intent on promoting a utopian, Bolshevik revolution around the globe. “President Bush is being lured into a trap baited for him by these neocons that could cost him his office and cause America to forfeit years of peace won by the sacrifices of two generations in the Cold War.” These neoconservatives, Buchanan continued, “harbor a ‘passionate attachment’ to a nation not our own that causes them to subordinate the interests of their own country and to act on an assumption that, somehow, what’s good for Israel is good for America.”⁷

But where the paleoconservative and traditional conservative critics of neoconservatism part company with the Left is in their embrace of U.S. power. Instead of fearing American might, these critics admire it. However, they worry about squandering the country’s power and are fond of recalling Edmund Burke’s warning: “I dread our own power and our own ambition. I dread being too much dreaded.”⁸ Buchanan and George F. Will see neoconservatives, like the *Weekly Standard*’s William Kristol, as championing big government abroad. In essence, they see American humanitarianism abroad as the foreign policy equivalent of welfare: it puts hostile populations on the dole, while Washington pursues counterproductive social engineering schemes. The paleoconservatives even see the neoconservatives as imposters—renegade Trotskyists who have changed their outward political coloration several times but remain intent on a utopian, permanent revolution that expands U.S. power to every nook and cranny of the globe.

It’s easy to see why conservatives, such as Buchanan, recoil at the neoconservative impulse, which began by criticizing radical tendencies

7. Patrick J. Buchanan, “Whose War?” *The American Conservative* (March 24, 2003): 5.

8. Edmund Burke, cited by Owen Harries, “Understanding America,” at www.cis.org.au/Events/CIS_lectures/2002/Harries_030402.htm.

inside the Democratic party before moving, decades later, firmly into the GOP camp. Neoconservatives have been allies, rather than long-standing members, of the GOP. They have traditionally prized independence more than allegiance to a particular political creed, though some, such as Richard Perle, remain members of the Democratic party, even as they travel in Republican circles. The close-knit circle of neoconservatives, from the American Enterprise Institute to the Project for the New American Century, has fueled charges that they operate more like an underground cell than an intellectual movement.

But do neoconservatives really form a cabal that has suborned Bush and manipulated U.S. foreign policy on behalf of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon? Would the GOP be better off without the neoconservative persuasion that, in Irving Kristol's words, has taken as its mission converting the "Republican party, and American conservatism in general, against their respective wills, into a new kind of conservative politics suitable to governing a modern democracy"?⁹ A look at the history of neoconservatism suggests that it would not.

Neoconservatism hardly has an unblemished record. It has, on more than one occasion, substituted polemical thrusts for sober analysis, alarmism for insight.¹⁰ But it has formed, by and large, the intellectual brain trust for the GOP over the past two decades. Neoconservatism first earned prominence in the late 1960s, when liberal public intellectuals, such as Kristol and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, criticized the excesses of the welfare state and social planning. In the 1970s, neoconservatives added a foreign policy critique, condemning the flaccidity of the liberal response to communism after America's defeat in Vietnam. Although the neoconservatives argued that America may have gone astray in Vietnam, it was not the new international bad guy. Soviet expansionism, not American interven-

9. Irving Kristol, "The Neoconservative Persuasion," *The Weekly Standard* (August 25, 2003): 23.

10. For an eloquent critique, see Francis Fukuyama, "The Neoconservative Moment," *National Interest* (Summer 2004).

tionism, was the culprit for global ills. Israel, they maintained, should be defended from attacks by despotic Third World regimes masquerading at the United Nations as the conscience of humanity. For these beliefs, the neoconservatives were ridiculed by the liberal establishment: *Harper's* response was not untypical; it ran an article deriding the "Warrior Intellectuals," as leading Left thinker Frances FitzGerald dubbed Moynihan and others.

The neoconservatives were undaunted. The United States, they declared, needed to confront the Soviet Union whenever and wherever possible, emphasizing military power and human rights, particularly liberty for Soviet Jews to travel to Israel, Europe, and the United States. With the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, neoconservatives believed that their hawkish approach had been vindicated.

If the Soviet empire could be toppled, reasoned neoconservatives, so could Middle East totalitarianism. After September 11, neoconservatism offered a rationale for intervention abroad that Bush appeared to embrace. Neoconservatives argued that decades of terrorism emanating from the Middle East meant that an aggressive push for democracy and the unflinching use of U.S. military power had to take precedence. Iraq was supposed to be the test case for this new doctrine.

In recent months, however, neoconservatism has come into ill repute. It has not been possible to democratize Iraq as easily as many neoconservatives, such as Richard Perle, had predicted. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, among others, confessed to succumbing to illusions about the malleability of Iraq and other foreign cultures. But a good case can be made that the problem with the Bush administration's policy in Iraq and elsewhere is not that it is dictated by neoconservatives but that it is not neoconservative enough. Had the Bush administration pushed more relentlessly and expended more resources in Iraq to secure democracy and human rights, it would not be flirting with a debacle in the Middle East. Whatever neoconser-

vatism's pluses and minuses, for the GOP to follow the realist, let alone the paleoconservative, course would be a prescription for a crabbed amorality in international affairs and, ultimately, political impotence. Before neoconservatism becomes further enshrouded in myths by its adversaries on the Right as well as the Left, it might be useful to examine what neoconservatism has contributed to the conservative movement—and where it's headed.

The Origins of Neoconservatism

Perhaps one of the most potent myths about neoconservatism is that it is nothing more than Trotskyism dressed up as conservatism. This notion—that neoconservatism represents a kind of latter-day utopian, Bolshevism—has spread rapidly, even to the upper reaches of government, where Secretary of State Colin Powell's chief of staff, Larry Wilkerson, recently complained to, of all places, the magazine *Gentleman's Quarterly*: "I call them utopians. . . . I don't care whether utopians are Vladimir Lenin in a sealed train going to Moscow or Paul Wolfowitz. Utopians, I don't like. You're never going to bring utopia, and you're going to hurt a lot of people in the process of trying to do it."¹¹

To repudiate such charges, a number of neoconservatives, including Joshua Muravchik, dismissed the notion that neoconservatism has anything to do with Trotskyism.¹² But this is not quite right. The development of neoconservatism certainly cannot be divorced from the ideological battles of the 1930s. Contrary to a number of histories, including John Ehrman's *The Rise of Neoconservatism*, neoconservatism is not simply a creature of the cold war that tried to maintain

11. Wil S. Hylton, "Casualty of War," *Gentleman's Quarterly* (June 2004): 227.

12. Joshua Muravchik, "The Neoconservative 'Cabal,'" *Commentary* (September 2003). See also Bill King, "Neoconservatives and Trotskyism," www.enterstage.right.com, March 22, 2004. King maintained that "despite its current popularity, the 'Trotskyist neocon' assertion contributes nothing to our understanding of the origins, or nature, of neoconservatism."

cold war liberalism in the 1960s.¹³ Its cold war had already begun in the 1930s, when Trotskyism served as a valuable way station on the road to all-out anticommunism after the Second World War.

Nothing dominated New York intellectual life more than disputes over communism in the 1930s. For Jews who had emigrated from Russia to the United States at the turn of the century, Communist doctrine was always appealing. The fellow-traveling writer Maurice Hindus published a study in 1927 called *The Jew as Radical*, which maintained that Jews had an innate propensity, dating back to their biblical origins, for radicalism.

Although many Jews embraced the Soviet Union, the founding fathers of what would become neoconservatism—Lionel Trilling, Sidney Hook, and Elliot Cohen—did not. They viewed the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state and the intellectual outcast, Trotsky, with sympathy.

A signal event in strengthening the original neoconservatives' antipathy toward American Communists was a strike called for February 16, 1934, in New York to protest fascist Austrian chancellor Engelbert Dolluss's attack on Viennese communal tenements for workers. Madison Square Garden, which was filled with about 18,000 socialist trade union workers, was infiltrated by about 2,000 Communists, who marched in formation with banners and musical instruments. The Communists turned what was supposed to be a broad left-wing protest against fascism into a riot.

The socialist *New Leader* declared, "New York learned at first hand how it was that Hitler came into power in Germany when a vast demonstration of solidarity with heroic Austrian socialists . . . was turned into a dog-fight by the deliberate and planned actions of gangs that call themselves the Communist Party."¹⁴ The fight in the Garden replicated the feud between Communists and Socialists in

13. John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

14. "Madison Square Garden," *The New Leader* (February 24, 1934): 1.

Nazi Germany. Even as Hitler gained power, the German Communist party had slavishly followed Stalin's orders to battle, not the Nazis but the Social Democrats. Only one Marxist—Leon Trotsky—warned that this was a suicidal strategy. Not only did Trotsky warn of a European war, but also “Trotsky's Jewishness,” wrote scholar Joseph Nevada, “came to the fore during the latter part of the 1930s. His abhorrence of Nazism appears to have extended beyond a deep-rooted antifascism. He was doubly articulate because of his racial origin; he clearly foresaw the imminent genocide of his coreligionists.”¹⁵

Trotsky's message resounded among intellectuals in the United States. In March 1934, *Modern Monthly* printed “An Open Letter to American Intellectuals,” bemoaning that the Communists had wrecked a united front against fascism. The signers of the letter included Trilling and Cohen. The Communist party organ “New Masses” attacked “these loop-de-loopers from Zionism to ‘internationalism’: the Brenners, the Cohens, the Novacks, the Trillings. . . . They now imagine themselves to be Trotzkyies [sic], hence the declared enemies of the Communist Party use them for what they are worth.”¹⁶

What was all the fuss about? It was, you might say, the first confrontation in the anti-Stalinist battle that would rage after World War II. Trotsky, as Alexander Bloom observed, gave young Jews a path out of the Jewish ghetto without committing the ultimate act of treason, which was to break with their parents' Socialist verities. Among those who embraced Trotskyism were Irving Kristol, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Gertrude Himmelfarb, as well as Albert Wohlschetter, who was a close friend of Sidney Hook's and who would play a pivotal role in grooming a generation of neoconservatives. At the City College of New York, these young intellectuals matched wits

15. Joseph Nevada, *Trotsky and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society), 5.

16. Cited in Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1987), 63.

with the Stalinists. Kristol was a member of Max Schachtman's Workers' Party, or, to put it more precisely, of a faction inside the party called the "Shermanites."

For all their suspicion of Stalinism, these young intellectuals were lamentably blind to the danger represented by Nazism and the need for the United States to confront Germany. The main problem was that they were hostile to Roosevelt and mainstream liberalism. They denounced Stalin for conniving with Roosevelt rather than refusing to cooperate with him. Schachtman, who would groom neoconservatives such as Carl Gershman and Joshua Muravchik in the 1960s, by which time he had shed his Trotskyism, declared in the "New International" that the only issue of World War II was "who [is] going to get the major share of the swag. The blood stains all of their hands alike." In his view, "Hitler is not Attila" and Nazism represented "a stage in the development of capitalist society, the epoch of its decay."¹⁷

Kristol attacked Hook for supporting the war. According to Kristol, Hook was a demagogue: "In his near hysterical insistence upon the pressing military danger . . . we recognize not only a common academic reaction to events, but also an ominously familiar political weapon. It is the exact technique of the Communist-liberal coalition during the days of the Popular Front and Collective Security." Kristol added that "the war in Asia clarifies brutally the activating war aims of the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands as far as the vital questions of empire and freedom are concerned. Professor Hook busies himself with an abstract war against Hitler rather than handle the less attractive reality of a completely reactionary crusade against 'those yellow b—s.' It's always the other fellow's nerve."¹⁸ Trotskyist Dwight MacDonald, in the February 1944 maiden issue of *Politics*, declared, "I think we can start out from the proposition that this war is not a

17. Max Schachtman, "Only Socialism Can Bring Peace and Freedom," *Labor Action* (February 28, 1944): 3.

18. William Ferry, "Other People's Nerve," *Enquiry* (May 1943): 5–6. (William Ferry was Kristol's Trotskyist cognomen.)

struggle between Good and Evil, or Democracy and Totalitarianism, but rather a clash of rival imperialisms.”¹⁹ As these passages suggest, it could be argued that Kristol, among others, was always wary of liberalism, whether he was on the Left or the Right.

The problem, of course, was that many early neoconservatives were blind to the great totalitarian threat posed by Hitler’s murder of the Jews. A few were not. Wohlstetter, who with his wife, Roberta, sponsored numerous Jewish refugees, knew better. (He repeated this gesture during the Bosnian war, when genocide in Europe loomed again.) Alfred Kazin was also not blind. He famously wrote in the *New Republic* in 1943 that liberals, radicals, and conservatives alike were ignoring the tragedy taking place in Europe. Similarly, in the *New Leader*, the doughty Melvin J. Lasky condemned the passivity of the Roosevelt administration toward the murder of the Jews. And in *Labor Action*, Jessie Kaaren lamented that “there are at least hundreds of thousands, if not millions, that could be rescued in spite of the war and Nazi supervision if the Allied governments were to put into action the fine sounding phrases they devote themselves to, like those in the Atlantic Charter.”²⁰

By 1945, with the horrors of Europe impossible to overlook, everyone from Kristol to MacDonald was shedding the dogmas of Trotskyism for anticommunism. Anticommunism may even have become something of a psychological compensation for having missed the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century because everyone had been so preoccupied with debating the fine points of Marxist dogma.

But the New York intellectuals had indisputably learned about the dangers of Stalinism from Trotsky. In 1945, the view that the Soviet Union was a present danger was given weight and authority in an article by James Burnham in *Partisan Review*. In the article, called “Lenin’s Heir,” Burnham laid out what would become cold war anti-

19. Dwight MacDonald, *Politics* (February 1944): 1.

20. Jessie Kaaren, “Jews of Europe Face Doom,” *Labor Action* (February 28 1944): 4.

Communist strategy, even before George F. Kennan had alerted Washington to the peril posed by the Kremlin. In his essay, Burnham observed that “most of us who developed an opposition to Stalinism from what we have regarded as the left were taught our first lessons by Trotsky.” Burnham made the case that, far from being a mediocrity, as Trotsky had claimed, Stalin was a great leader who had laid the foundations for Soviet expansionism. Burnham grandiloquently declared, “Starting from the magnetic core of the Eurasian heartland, the Soviet power, like the reality of the One of Neo-Platonism overflowing in the descending series of the emanative progression, flows outward, west into Europe, south into the Near East, east into China, already lapping the shores of the Atlantic, the Yellow and China Seas, the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf . . . until it is dissipated in . . . the outer material sphere, beyond the Eurasian boundaries, of momentary Appeasement and Infiltration (England, the United States).”²¹ The message was clear: Stalin had to be stopped. There could be no meaningful distinction between the Soviet leader and the Soviet Union itself. Both were a menace.

The Cold War

After World War II, it would have been entirely anachronistic to call Kristol, Hook, Lasky, and Cohen, the latter of whom was the founder of *Commentary* in 1945, neoconservatives. Conservatism was in disrepute; it was the province, by and large, of anti-Semites and kooks who continued to regard the New Deal as a species of domestic communism. But Kristol and Trilling, among others, were as wary of liberal orthodoxies as they were of right-wing ones.²² Cohen, a bril-

21. James Burnham, “Lenin’s Heir,” *Partisan Review* (Winter 1945): 66–67.

22. Kristol pointed out that Trilling believed, “the liberal state of mind is reformist and humanitarian; a state of mind whose basis is snobbery, self-satisfaction, unimaginativeness. . . . The liberal flatters himself upon his intentions, ‘and prefers not to know that the good will generate its own problems, that the love of humanity has its own vices and the love of truth its own insensibilities.’ He is paternal and

liant editor, was particularly concerned to demonstrate in the postwar era that Jews could be relied upon. He wanted to show that not all Jews were Communists, which was, of course, true.

It was an understandable impulse. The Left was cracking up. The farther the Red Army reached into Europe, the more divided the American Left became. Anti-Communist liberals gathered around the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), while progressives supported Henry Wallace for president. Former Trotskyists, such as Kristol, joined forces with the ADA, which was led by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. But far too little attention has been paid to the fact that many of the former Trotskyists did not become conventional liberals. They retained their suspicion of the weaknesses of conventional liberals. Anticommunism, Christopher Lasch somewhat overheatedly argued, “represented a new stage in their [the former Trotskyists’] running polemic against bourgeois sentimentality and weakness, bourgeois ‘utopianism’ and bourgeois materialism.”²³ But it was certainly true that Kristol, Lasky, and others took a far more ideological approach to the cold war than did realist thinkers, such as Schlesinger, Walter Lippmann, and George F. Kennan. The split that would take place over Vietnam in 1968 was already dimly present in 1948. The future neoconservatives, who were more battle hardened than Schlesinger, were wary of liberalism’s weakness in staring down communism. The ideological battles of the 1930s had prepared Kristol and others for a more ideological cold war. The fights over communism were now transported onto a larger canvas. Where they had previously been internecine feuds that occasionally spilled over into the public arena,

pedagogic, smug in the knowledge of his righteousness, and sure of the adequacy of his program. . . . An insidious cruelty is at work, in which all men are expendable in order to make a point.” Irving Kristol, “The Moral Critic,” *Enquiry* (April 1944): 22.

23. Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 68.

the question of who was, and was not, a Communist, and who was, and was not, a fellow traveler acquired a new importance.

In a 1946 article in *Partisan Review*, for example, William Barrett attacked domestic traitors who wanted to appease the Soviet Union. He argued that liberals were “advocating a policy to sell out . . . millions into Stalinist slavery.” “It is clear from this outline of their recent behavior,” he noted, “that the ‘liberals’ are embarked upon nothing less than a policy of appeasement of Russia.”²⁴ Kristol went one step further and pilloried liberals who had failed to denounce communism with sufficient ardor: “[T]here is one thing that the American people know about Senator McCarthy: he, like them, is unequivocally anti-Communist. About the spokesmen for American liberalism they feel they know no such thing. And with some justification.”²⁵ To some degree, for Kristol, the cold war was about using the Communist issue as a wedge to attack liberals. It was the opposite of what Schlesinger believed—that communism from without, not within, was the real problem.

For all the ructions about communism in the early 1950s, much of the decade embodied a fairly placid consensus about America. It wasn't until the 1960s that the ideological battles resumed. Ironically enough, they were ignited by none other than the young editor of *Commentary*, Norman Podhoretz. Podhoretz rebelled at the notion that the United States embodied the good life. As he saw it, things were not so rosy as often depicted. The United States was decrepit, listless, moribund. What's more, the U.S. record in the cold war wasn't all that innocent. Podhoretz began publishing revisionist historian Staughton Lynd, who claimed that both sides were responsible for the cold war; William Appleman Williams, dean of the revisionists, claimed that Lynd was actually underestimating U.S. responsi-

24. William Barrett, *The Truants* (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 244–49.

25. Irving Kristol, “‘Civil Liberties,’ 1952—A Study in Confusion,” *Commentary* (March 1952): 229.

bility. Norman Birnbaum observed in 1962 that “Anti-Communism, as an intellectually respectable position, is ending.”²⁶

As the New Left drifted into violence, anti-Semitism, and black radicalism, however, neoconservatism emerged from its embryo. The extent to which neoconservatism is a movement that went from Left to Right has been greatly exaggerated. Podhoretz, who belonged to a younger generation, may have briefly flirted with radical ideas, but Kristol, Trilling, and others had always been wary of the weaknesses of the liberal Left in confronting totalitarian impulses. Since the late 1940s, they had been fairly consistent about their political views and didn't really change them all that much. To them, it seemed that on the home front liberals were once more succumbing to the threats and blandishments of the Far Left, as they had in the 1930s. Podhoretz had already written, in 1963, of “the insane rage that can stir in me at the thought of Negro anti-Semitism.” Four years later, as Egypt massed forces in the Sinai desert and cut off Israel's access to the Suez Canal, black anti-Semitism began to reach a new high. After Israel won a sensational victory in the 1967 war, Jewish pride in the United States began to surge. By 1968, while addressing the Council of Foreign Relations, Podhoretz was accused by former John Kennedy speechwriter Theodore Sorensen of putting Israel's interests ahead of U.S. interests.

Far more volatile charges had already been leveled by black radicals and the New Left. In August 1967, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee charged that Zionism was racism. At a National Conference for New Politics “Convention on 1968 and Beyond,” which was held in Chicago over Labor Day weekend in 1967, radicals demanded a condemnation of Israel. Kristol later observed that “for 200 years Jews generally found their friends on the left. Now they find their enemies. . . . We have an interest—American

26. Norman Birnbaum, “The Coming End of Anti-Communism,” *Partisan Review* (Summer 1962): 394.

Jews and Israelis—in preserving the status quo. Let us admit it, at least to ourselves.”²⁷

Perhaps the last straw for the budding neoconservatives was the assault on the schools and universities. Nowhere did the student revolt have more consequences for neoconservatism than at Cornell University in 1969, which was a hotbed of what had become known as Straussianism, after political philosopher Leo Strauss. In 1968, Straussian Nathan Tarcov, a recent graduate, approvingly recorded in the *Public Interest* that “Cornell did not have a revolution last year.”²⁸ Cornell soon made up for lost time. On April 20, 1969, at least eighty members of the Afro-American Society marched out of the student union brandishing rifles. As future neoconservative Allan Bloom saw it, Cornell was reminiscent of Weimar, Germany, where servile liberals had capitulated to Nazi thugs. He declared that “the resemblance on all levels to the first stages of a totalitarian takeover are almost unbelievable.”²⁹ For the students of Strauss, who had emigrated from Nazi Germany, the university administration capitulating to black student demands was a signal instance of liberal weakness. Strauss insisted on defending liberal values and of the need for an elite to inculcate those values through a demanding education in the great books. To Strauss, Israel was particularly important as an outpost of the West surrounded by moral enemies. In 1957, he even wrote a letter to the *National Review*, chastising it for being anti-Israel. Political Zionism restored the dignity of a people who remembered their heritage and stemmed the tide of the leveling of venerable differences; “it fulfilled a conservative function.”

Much nonsense has been written about Strauss’s supposed

27. Irving Spiegel, “American and Israeli Jews Reappraise Their Ties to the Left and Find They Are Now Tenuous,” *New York Times*, 6 August 1972: 13.

28. Nathan Tarcov, “Cornell: The Last Four Years at Cornell,” *Public Interest* (Fall 1968): 122.

29. Homer Bigart, “Faculty Revolt Upsets Cornell,” *New York Times*, 25 April 1969: 1, 30.

attempt to create a fascistic elite intent on ruling the vulgar multitude. In truth, Strauss, like most neoconservatives, worried about a liberal failure of nerve in confronting the Soviet Union and in defending Israel. The central concern of neoconservatives was the encroachment of totalitarianism, whether in Europe or the Middle East. The preoccupation was not with Israel as representing an outpost of the West. Were the United States to allow Israel to collapse, it would signal a fatal weakness in the larger struggle against Soviet totalitarianism.

The Political Influence of Neoconservatism

If neoconservatives were alarmed by what they saw as McGovernism, they were petrified by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's embrace of détente with the Soviet Union. It could be argued that no one did more to turn neoconservatism into a potent political force than did Kissinger. Like Strauss, Kissinger was an émigré from Germany, but he drew radically different lessons. Where Strauss believed it necessary to confront totalitarian regimes, Kissinger thought it necessary to cut deals with unsavory leaders and work out an accommodation. Indeed, Kissinger was a declinist who believed that the United States had to manage its foreign policy twilight.

Neoconservatives, such as Moynihan and Podhoretz, disagreed with Kissinger. But until the early 1970s, most neoconservatives had little, if any, political experience beyond launching broadsides in magazines like *Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, and the *Public Interest*. Their apostasies in the Democratic Party had been approvingly recorded by *National Review*, which declared that Harvard professor Nathan Glazer's 1971 essay in *Commentary* about intellectuals "says about the Jewish intellectual establishment in America what no non-Jew could say without being thought prejudiced."³⁰ But the neoconservatives needed a horse inside the Democratic Party to run for the presidency.

30. *National Review*.

Their candidate was Senator Henry M. Jackson. A domestic liberal, a staunch backer of Israel, a fierce critic of the United Nations, and, above all, a foe of détente with the Soviet Union, Jackson became the most prominent neoconservative politician.

Like other neoconservatives, Jackson was profoundly shaped by World War II. As the son of Scandinavian immigrants, he would ask, “Of what avail to Norway’s people was all its clean air and pure water once Hitler’s troops had set foot on Norwegian soil?” A visit to the Buchenwald concentration camp in April 1945, as part of a congressional delegation, helped instill a lifelong support for Israel. Jackson put together what would become an influential advisory group of neoconservatives, including his aides Richard Perle, Charles Horner, and Elliott Abrams, as well as Princeton University professor Bernard Lewis, strategist Albert Wohlstetter, and Russian historian Richard Pipes.

On the face of it, Kissinger, a supporter of the Vietnam War and a Jewish émigré, should have been exactly the type of person to appeal to Jackson and other neoconservatives. But as Kissinger recounted in his memoirs, “To my astonishment, I found myself in confrontation with a former ally in what became an increasingly tense relationship. What made the conflict both strange and painful was that I felt more comfortable with Jackson on most issues than with many newfound allies.”³¹ For neoconservatives, ranging from Jackson to Moynihan to Podhoretz, Kissinger became Exhibit A of what was wrong with American foreign policy.

The neoconservatives succeeded in derailing détente. Jackson pushed the linkage of freedom of emigration for Jews with most-favored-nation status for the Soviet Union and obstructed Kissinger’s arms-control negotiations with the Soviet Union. Kissinger fumed, calling Perle “a little bastard” and “a son of Mensheviks who thinks

31. Henry A. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1982), 250.

all Bolsheviks are evil.” Nixon declared “that a storm will hit American Jews if they are intransigent.” But the Republican Party was already moving to the Right. Kissinger recalled in his memoirs that Nixon, “great tactician that he was, never conceived that he, the renowned Cold Warrior, would in the end be attacked from his old base on the right wing of the Republican Party.” But presidential candidate Ronald Reagan declared that “[u]nder Kissinger and Ford, this nation has become number two in a world where it is dangerous—if not fatal—to be second best.”

Not until 1979 did the neoconservatives and Reagan join forces. James Nuechterlein, writing in the May 1996 *First Things*, noted that “few if any neoconservatives were early supporters of Reagan, whom they correctly viewed as a traditionalist conservative with strong libertarian leanings. Prior to 1980, most neoconservatives regarded him with a combination of condescension and mistrust.”³² It was the Carter era, with its insistence on continuing Kissinger’s détente with the Soviet Union, that convinced Podhoretz and others that Reagan was the answer. The neoconservative vehicle in the 1970s was the Coalition for a Democratic Majority. It was created in the early 1970s by labor leaders and neoconservative intellectuals, who warned that Carter was succumbing to illusions about the Soviet threat. (This coalition still formally exists on paper.) In his essay *The Present Danger*, Podhoretz made the case for moralpolitik versus realpolitik, worrying that the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan represented “the final collapse of an American resolve to resist the forward surge of Soviet imperialism.”³³

It’s easy enough to mock such apprehensions in retrospect, but at the time the Soviet Union did seem to be on the right side of history and the United States on the retreat. Reagan’s arms buildup, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and depiction of the Soviet Union as

32. James Nuechterlein, *First Things* (May 1996): 14–15.

33. Norman Podhoretz, *The Present Danger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 3.

an “evil empire,” however, seemed to signal that the United States was back on the offensive. Neoconservatives backed the administration to the hilt and seemed themselves to be on the winning side once the Soviet imperium collapsed. So definitive did the victory appear that Podhoretz, among others, began publishing requiems for the neoconservative movement. Then, as Podhoretz astutely noted, Bill Clinton, after a lackluster beginning, started to embrace neoconservative principles. He stared down the Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo, sent gunships off Haiti, and bombed Afghanistan and Sudan. Meanwhile, the GOP lashed out at Clinton, denouncing humanitarian intervention and, indeed, seeming to return to isolationist principles, at least in the House of Representatives, where Tom DeLay, among others, decried the use of U.S. military power abroad. As Joshua Muravchik pointed out, it was the realists in the GOP who wanted to do nothing when hostilities first broke out in Bosnia: “then-President George H. W. Bush dismissed them as a ‘hiccup,’ while Secretary of State James Baker declared: ‘We have no dog in that fight.’ These two were not heartless men, but they were exemplars of a traditional conservative cast of mind. The essence of the matter, as they saw it, was that Bosnia engaged little in the way of American interests, which in the conventional view meant vital resources, or strategic geography, or the safety of allies.”³⁴ It was no coincidence that Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, among others, worked closely with human rights organizations to rouse more support for the Bosnians as they faced the marauding Serbs, who were intent on a genocidal land grab (a stance, incidentally, that seems to have eluded some opponents of the Iraq war, who dismiss Wolfowitz’s concern with the suppression of the Kurds and Shiittes by Saddam Hussein’s forces as so much window dressing).³⁵ With the Democrats pursuing

34. Joshua Muravchik, “The Neoconservative ‘Cabal,’” *Commentary* (September 2003): 32.

35. Wolfowitz, for instance, made no secret of his unhappiness with the reluctance of the first Bush administration and, initially, the Clinton administration to

a more aggressive foreign policy, there was really no need for neo-conservatism any longer. Or was there?

The truth is that the current divide in the Republican Party—between those like George F. Will and those further on the fringes, such as Patrick Buchanan, who assail neoconservatives for big government nation-building in Iraq—was already present in the 1990s. It was Irving Kristol's son's attempt to create “national greatness conservatism” that is at the bottom of the rift in the Bush administration. In a 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article, William Kristol and Robert Kagan wrote “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” which called for aggressively promoting democracy abroad. In the pages of *The Wall Street Journal* in 1997, Kristol and David Brooks elaborated on this theme. They urged conservatives to incorporate progressive American nationalists into the conservative pantheon—Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay, and Teddy Roosevelt. “How can Americans love their nation if they hate its government?” asked Kristol and Brooks.³⁶

The response from small-government traditionalists, led by writers from *National Review's* orbit, was quick. “No aspect of our lives has escaped assault by government,” economist Paul Craig Roberts declared. “The Constitution of the United States has been reduced to a scrap of paper.”³⁷ The *National Review* itself complained, “Our usable past won't all fit into a be-happy Op-Ed piece.”

Today, similar complaints are voiced by a growing chorus of traditional conservatives. Some argue that the influence of neoconser-

aid the Bosnians: “Of the many failures of Western policy in the former Yugoslavia, none was more important or more contemptible than the failure to provide the government of Bosnia with the means to defend itself from the campaign of ‘ethnic cleansing’ launched by Milosevic, the ruler of Serbia, and his Bosnian Serb henchmen led by Kardzic and Mladic.” Paul Wolfowitz, “The Man Who Saved the Day—Sort of . . .,” *National Interest* (Fall 1998): 102.

36. William Kristol and David Brooks, “What Ails Conservatism,” *Wall Street Journal*, 15 September 1997: A16

37. Paul Craig Roberts, “Government and the Country,” *Washington Times*, 19 September 1997.

vatism has been grossly exaggerated. They even come close to writing it out of existence. “Long before the neoconservatives came along,” contended Ramesh Ponnuru, “Barry Goldwater saw that the Soviet Union’s foreign policy was not a mere extension of traditional Russian imperialism but was inseparable from its Communist ideology and practice.”³⁸ Others yearn for the days when Senator Robert Taft, a leading light of the party in the 1940s and 1950s known as “Mr. Republican,” decried America’s entry into NATO and its sponsorship of the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe: “No foreign policy can be justified except a policy devoted . . . to the protection of the liberty of the American people, with war only as the last resort and only to protect that liberty.” But as more sensible Republicans, such as William F. Buckley Jr., recognized, “In order to fight communism, we may have to accept bureaucratic totalitarianism on these shores” because communism was “the greatest danger the West has ever faced.”

With the end of the cold war and despite September 11, the difficulties of the Iraq war continue to stir doubts. Is it not possible that the Iraq venture, so muddled in execution, was fated for failure? A May 3 *National Review* editorial, called “An End to Illusion,” lamented “an underestimation in general of the difficulty of implanting democracy in alien soil, and an overestimation in particular of the sophistication of what is fundamentally still a tribal society. And one devastated by decades of tyranny.” But it politely states that “Iraq was not a Wilsonian—or a ‘neoconservative’—war. It was broadly supported by the Right as a war of national interest.”³⁹

Well, maybe. But as William Kristol recently remarked in the *New York Times*, “If we have to make common cause with the more hawkish liberals and fight the conservatives, that is fine with me.” This suggests that neoconservatism’s political peregrinations may not

38. Ramesh Ponnuru, “Getting to the Bottom of This ‘Neo’ Nonsense,” *National Review* (June 16, 2003): 30.

39. “An End to Illusion,” *National Review* (May 3, 2004): 14, 16.

be over.⁴⁰ The truth is that Iraq was a neoconservative war in its optimism about remaking Iraq and implanting liberal democracy in the Middle East. The project to transform the Middle East would have been unthinkable without being championed by such senior officials as Wolfowitz. After September 11, the defection to neoconservative ideas, if not to the movement itself, by former Trotskyists such as Christopher Hitchens and Paul Berman suggests how powerful the belief in confronting offensively, not defensively, Islamic totalitarian movements has become, and remains, despite the impasse in Iraq.

Until now, President Bush has largely endorsed the neoconservative program in the Middle East. It is not too much to say that Bush is a neoconservative, someone who Wolfowitz said during the 2000 campaign reminded him of “Scoop” Jackson. In a new version of dictatorships and double standards, Bush maintains that it is racist to believe that Arabs are unfit for democracy. Far from being a passive conduit for a neoconservative cabal, Bush believes wholeheartedly in upending the Middle East. Indeed, if neoconservative officials in the administration are right, Bush himself has been pushing the pace against a reluctant bureaucracy. Unlike Reagan, who was reluctant to intervene militarily abroad and relied on proxies, Bush has aggressively prosecuted the war on terrorism.

If the administration fails in Iraq, many conservatives will endorse a kind of realpolitik that has not served the GOP well in the past. Neoconservatives won't. It would be no small irony if the neoconservatives once again become a small faction, as they were in the early 1970s, uncomfortable in either the Republican or Democratic Parties. In a reversal of their long-standing intellectual role, they might even find themselves disputing more with conservatives than liberals in coming years.

In the *National Review*, at the height of neoconservative influence

40. David D. Kirkpatrick, “Lack of Resolution in Iraq Finds Conservatives Divided,” *New York Times*, 19 April 2004: A21.

in April 2003, David Frum ended a lengthy attack on paleoconservatives by declaring that unpatriotic conservatives “have turned their backs on their country. Now we turn our backs on them.”⁴¹ But the reverse may occur as the GOP descends into a fight between realists and neoconservatives that could prove as poisonous to the Republicans as were the foreign policy fights that racked the Democratic Party during the 1970s and 1980s. Just as Democrats shied away from an activist foreign policy for decades following Vietnam, so too a Bush defeat in November could trigger a prolonged civil war inside the GOP over the use of U.S. power at home and abroad.

But if Bush wins re-election, the opposite will occur. Contrary to myth, Bush has not been hijacked by neoconservatives. Instead, he is, if anything, an even more ardent proponent of intervention than many of his advisors. Consider his June 2, 2004, speech to the Air Force Academy, in which he depicted himself as Reagan’s legatee. In a passage that has not received the attention it deserves, Bush declared, “[A]s events in Europe determined the outcome of the Cold War, events in the Middle East will set the course of our current struggle. If that region is abandoned to dictators and terrorists, it will be a constant source of violence and alarm, exporting killers of increasing destructive power to attack America and other free nations. If that region grows in democracy and prosperity and hope, the terrorist movement will lose its sponsors, lose its recruits, and lose the festering grievances that keep terrorists in business. The stakes of this struggle are high. The security and peace of our country are at stake, and success in this struggle is our only option.”⁴²

If Bush wins re-election and the GOP retains its Senate majority, neoconservatives will likely remain influential. The main targets in a Bush second term would be Syria and Iran. Already Bush has imposed

41. David Frum, “Unpatriotic Conservatives,” *National Review* (April 7, 2003): 40.

42. “President Bush Speaks at Air Force Academy Graduation,” www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040602.html.

sanctions against Syria. Nor would neoconservatism vanish if Bush loses. As Senators Joseph I. Lieberman and Jon Kyl's recent reconstitution of the Committee on Present Danger indicates, the movement is not going away; rather, it is preparing to revive itself as a kind of counterestablishment that criticizes both Democrats and Republicans for failing to face up to the dangers posed by militant Islam. It is perhaps as critics, rather than as policy makers, that neoconservatives will be most effective. As Irving Kristol, the godfather of the neoconservatives, wrote in the *Weekly Standard*, neoconservatism is "enjoying a second life" under Bush. Foes on the Right and Left may be eager to bury, not praise, the neoconservatives, but the obsequies are entirely premature.