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Why Neoconservatism Still Matters

The world started paying attention to the existence of American neoconservatives in 2002-2003, as they stepped up their campaign in favor of an invasion of Iraq. In the following years, their trajectory was generally seen as a short-lived aberration, a rapid rise and fall ending in the failure that was the Iraq intervention, discrediting once and for all their idealistic militarism. In other words, neoconservatives are now seen as something of the past.

This conventional view, however, is inaccurate on two counts. First, the neoconservatives never had the kind of overbearing influence on the Bush administration many opponents credit them with, including on the Iraq war. Second, not only had this school of thought been active in American foreign policy debates for three decades before the Iraq episode, but it actually never left the Washington political and intellectual scene—even at the time of its greatest ebb, in 2005-2007. On the contrary, neoconservatism remains, to this day, a distinct and very significant voice of the Washington establishment.

After offering a presentation of what neoconservatism really means, and contrasting it with other schools of thought in American foreign policy, this paper lays out the main reasons behind their continued influence in the Obama era—their institutional, intellectual and political dynamism—and argues that neoconservatives will play a meaningful role in shaping American foreign policy in the future.

What neoconservatism means today

The label "neoconservative" was first used in the early 1970s by friends and enemies of a group of New York intellectuals who were critical of the leftward turn that American liberalism had, in their view, taken in the previous decade.[1] What these intellectuals reacted against was a mix of social movements—like student protests, counterculture, black nationalism, radical feminism and environmentalism—and government overreach through Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" programs. While in no way defenders of the free market or the night-watchman state like the true *National Review* conservatives, they stressed the limits of social engineering (through transfers of wealth or affirmative action programs) and pointed out the dangers that the boundless egalitarian dreams of the New Left had created for stability, meritocracy and democracy. Intellectuals such as Nathan Glazer, Seymour Martin Lipset, James Q. Wilson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan coalesced around *The Public Interest*, a magazine created by Irving Kristol and Daniel Bell in 1965, and a few years later around *Commentary*, whose editor was Norman Podhoretz.

These original neoconservative were New York-based intellectuals, primarily interested in domestic issues, and they still regarded themselves as liberals. That is why the disconnect could not seem more complete between them and the latter-day neocons, who are Washington-based political operatives identified with

[1] "Neoconservatism" used in a friendly way: see Robert Bartley, "Irving Kristol and Friends," *Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 1972, p. 20; as an epithet, see Michael Harrington, "The Welfare State and Its Neoconservative Critics," *Dissent*, Autumn 1973, pp. 435–454. For other sources and historical aspects, see my *Neoconservatism,* op. cit., chapter 2.

the right, interested exclusively in foreign policy, and who have a solid, if not excessive, confidence in the ability of the American government to enact social change—at least in Iraq or Afghanistan.[2] There exists, nonetheless, a tenuous link between the two groups, which explains why the label has travelled through time. This link is provided by a third, intermediate family of neoconservatives, the Scoop Jackson Democrats of the 1970s and 1980s—named after Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, a Democrat from Washington state—and the real ideological ancestors of the contemporary neocons, the ones who literally invented neoconservative foreign policy.

The Scoop Jackson Democrats were also born of a reaction to the New Left, but this time, inside the Democratic Party, when Senator George McGovern won the nomination to be the Democratic candidate against Richard Nixon in 1972. McGovern was seen by traditional Democrats as way too far to the left, both in domestic policy (he supported massive social programs and affirmative action through quotas) and in foreign policy, where he advocated a hasty retreat from Vietnam, deep cuts in the defense budget, and a neo-isolationist grand strategy. Coalescing around *Commentary*, Scoop Jackson's Senate office and a group called the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, Democratic operatives and intellectuals such as Richard Perle, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Eugene Rostow, Ben Wattenberg, Joshua Muravchik, Elliott Abrams, and others, tried to steer the Democratic Party back to the center. They wanted to get back to the tradition of Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John Kennedy: progressive policies at home, muscular anti-communism abroad, including the defense of human rights and fellow democracies. That is why they found themselves battling not only the left wing of the Democrats, but also Nixon and Kissinger's realist policy of détente, which included de-emphasizing ideological concerns and engaging Moscow, thereby, from the neoconservative perspective, legitimizing the Soviet regime rather than trying to change it.

Since the much tougher line they advocated failed to win the favors of the Democratic Party (Jimmy Carter remained, in their view, way too dovish), the Scoop Jackson Democrats crossed party lines and went to work for the Ronald Reagan administration. They inspired part of Reagan's foreign policy —including support for the "freedom fighters" to harass the Soviet empire, especially in Afghanistan and Central America, the defense build-up, the hard line on arms control, the "evil empire" rhetoric, and the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy. But ultimately, Reagan distanced himself from this line, especially during his second mandate, not unlike the way George W. Bush did with the neocons after 2005.

For all their differences, the first two families of neoconservatives—the New York intellectuals and the Scoop Jackson Democrats—had a few things in common. They fought the same enemies, including leftist liberalism, moral relativism and anti-Americanism. They shared journals and institutions (such as *Commentary*, the *Wall Street Journal* opinion pages, and the American Enterprise Institute). And a few neoconservatives of the first family, such as Pat Moynihan, Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, and Nathan Glazer, became full-fledged neoconservatives of the second family, while some Scoop Jackson Democrats such as Jeane Kirkpatrick got much closer to the original neoconservatives on domestic issues. That is why the label ended up covering the two groups, even though many original neoconservatives, especially Irving Kristol, the most important figure of the movement, did not share the beliefs of the Scoop Jackson Democrats—and *The Public Interest*, the flagship journal of the original neoconservatives, never dealt with foreign policy.[3]

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[2] On the contradiction between the original neoconservative criticism of social engineering at home and the current neoconservative support for nation-building in Afghanistan, Iraq or the Balkans, see Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

[3] On Irving Kristol's differences with other neoconservatives, especially on foreign policy, see my article "Was Irving Kristol a Neoconservative?" *Foreign Policy* website, September 23, 2009, available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/23/was_irving_kristol_a_neoconservative>.

Then, in the mid-1990s, at the very moment when neoconservatism was being declared dead because the Cold War had been won, a third family of neoconservatives appeared: the latter-day neocons, who coalesced around *The Weekly Standard* (launched in 1995), the American Enterprise Institute, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC, 1997-2006), and figures such as Bill Kristol, son of Irving Kristol, Robert Kagan, Gary Schmitt, Max Boot and Doug Feith. They are the ideological heirs of the Scoop Jackson Democrats, but with some differences. First, they are now firmly located within the Republican family. The newcomers, the younger neocons, were never Democrats or liberals. It means, among other things, that they have to somehow reconcile their foreign policy stance with the electoral interests of the Republican Party. Second, America's relative power in the world has increased considerably since the days of Scoop Jackson and Ronald Reagan: the Soviet enemy is gone, and America's military force and economic strength are greater than ever (this, of course, has been less true recently). Whereas the Scoop Jackson Democrats urged Americans not to retreat, and to defend democracy and human rights, the neocons exhort them to advance and to act boldly—in other words, to use American power to shape a world that is safer for all.

Before getting to the specifics of this foreign policy vision, some basic characteristics of neoconservatism should also be mentioned. Neoconservatism is, and always was, an elite school of thought, not a popular movement. It was never an electoral force, in the sense that nobody ever got elected on a "neoconservative platform" and there are no neoconservative politicians—even though various political figures such as Scoop Jackson and Ronald Reagan in the past, as well as John McCain and Joe Lieberman in recent years, have been close to this school of thought. Neoconservatism has no religious, regional or economic base. It is in no way an organized force with a central authority. It is at most a network of thinkers sharing an intellectual outlook, or even simply a "persuasion" or "tendency," as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz sometimes described it.[4] Last but not least, one should always keep in mind the versatility and fickleness of labels, and never make a fetish of them. No two neoconservatives think the same on all issues, and many object to being called neoconservatives in the first place. These are famous examples of people who are incorrectly labeled neocons—such as John Bolton—but also persons whose views are not well ascertained, or have changed over time. This is the case for Dick Cheney, who, after being regarded as a realist, has been a fellow traveler of the neoconservatives since the 1990s and was their mainstay in the Bush administration, even though his own views reflect a pessimistic and narrow focus on national security rather than a bold and optimistic creed in the potential of American power abroad.

The five pillars of neoconservatism

This being said, most contemporary neoconservatives, whether they accept the label or not, share a clearly identified set of principles in foreign policy. Even though they might quibble among themselves on their particular application, the combination of these principles distinguishes the neoconservatives from other schools of thought, most notably the isolationists, the realists and the liberals. The five main neocon tenets presented below—internationalism, primacy, unilateralism, militarism and democracy—can be summarized from a wealth of articles, public letters, statements of principles and manifestoes written in the last 15 years.[5]

4 Norman Podhoretz, "Neoconservatism—A Eulogy," *Commentary*, March 1996; Irving Kristol, "The Neoconservative Persuasion," *Weekly Standard*, August 25, 2003.

5 See, in particular : William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, July–Aug 1996; Statement of principles of the Project for the New American Century, June 3, 1997, available at <http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm>; Charles Krauthammer, "Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World," Irving Kristol Lecture for 2004, February 12, 2004, available at <http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.19912,filter.all/pub_detail.asp>; Robert Kagan, "Neocon Nation: Neoconservatism, c. 1776," *World Affairs*, Spring 2008; Mission Statement of the Foreign Policy Initiative, Spring 2009, <http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/about>.

Internationalism

The first and most basic tenet of neoconservatism is a firm belief in the need for the United States to play an active role in the world. "The overarching goal of American foreign policy—to preserve and extend an international order that is in accord with both our material interests and our principles—endures," explained Bob Kagan and Bill Kristol in 2000. "Americans must shape this order, for if we refrain from doing so, we can be sure that others will shape it in ways that reflect neither our interests nor our values."[6] The danger is not that America would do too much: it is that it would do too little. "Strategic overreach is not the problem and retrenchment is not the solution," as the mission statement of the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) put it in 2009.[7] This assertive internationalism puts neocons in strong opposition to any form of isolationism and reduction of American presence in the world, whether advocated by the right (like the Cato Institute or Pat Buchanan) or by the liberal left (like the Institute for Policy Studies).

This belief also leads them to advocate foreign interventions more willingly than realists, who have stricter standards for committing U.S. troops and are less prone to consider that America's credibility, interests or ideals are at stake. In this willingness to intervene, the neocons are close to some liberals—the ones who have been labeled "liberal hawks," and who advocate humanitarian intervention to stop ethnic cleansing and genocides. This convergence was first observed about the Balkans in the 1990s, when neocons and liberals jointly encouraged Bill Clinton to act decisively in Bosnia and Kosovo, against the opinion of most realists such as James Baker and Colin Powell.[8] And it was largely to fight the apathy of the public and the isolationist mood of the Republican Party on the Balkans that the third family of neoconservatives, the neocons, appeared.

Primacy

The second pillar of neoconservatism—primacy—can be summarized by a few favorite expressions. "The indispensable nation" was first used by Madeleine Albright, herself a liberal hawk. "The benevolent empire" was coined by Robert Kagan who argued that, compared with past great powers, American hegemony was benign.[9] "The unipolar moment" was coined by Charles Krauthammer.[10] And to maintain sole superpower status by "preventing the re-emergence of a new rival" was an objective put forward by Paul Wolfowitz, then number three at the Pentagon, in an initial draft version of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (it was drafted by I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby and Zalmay Khalilzad, with input from outsiders such as Richard Perle and Albert Wohlstetter).[11] When stitched together, these expressions point to a simple but powerful idea: American primacy in the international system is a stroke of good fortune for the rest of the world, since America does not seek to conquer and oppress, but rather to liberate and democratize, and offers public goods to all. Unipolarity ensures American security but also global peace and should, therefore, be preserved as long as possible. This strategic vision is grounded in a strong belief in American exceptionalism and the inherent morality of the country, which can lead to a Manichean and self-righteous vision, as seen in George W. Bush's approach after 9/11. It is exactly the objection realists put forward: a strategy of primacy is self-defeating, they say, as it is too costly and triggers hostile reactions from other powers. America cannot do everything for everyone everywhere, and it cannot be right every time. It should therefore be more selective and focus on keeping a sound balance of power in the world.

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[6] Robert Kagan, William Kristol, "Burden of Power is Having to Wield It," *Washington Post*, March 19, 2000, available at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=231>.
[7] Mission Statement of FPI, op. cit.
[8] See Norman Podhoretz, "Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign-Policy Debates," *Commentary*, December 1999.
[9] Robert Kagan, "The Benevolent Empire," *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1998.
[10] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs—America and the World* 1990.
[11] Patrick Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop: A One-Superpower World," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

Unilateralism

Unilateralism, the third principle of neoconservatism, asserts that American power, not the United Nations Security Council, provides peace and security for the rest of the world—from protecting Taiwan, South Korea and Israel to restoring peace in the Balkans, fighting al Qaeda or keeping sea lanes open. The United States, therefore, should not be restrained in its capacity to act, neither by multilateral institutions nor by treaties—whether the International Criminal Court, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, treaties on biological weapons or antipersonnel mines—that rogue states will not respect in any case. In the neoconservative vision, the United Nations is not only ineffective, it is also illegitimate because it is profoundly undemocratic. The U.N. General Assembly gives as much power to Libya as to India, and the Security Council is even more flawed: why should a tyranny (China) and a semi-dictatorship (Russia) hold veto power over what the international community does? The models of collective action neoconservatives prefer are a league of democracies of some sort (as John McCain proposed in 2008) or "coalitions of the willing," as in the Iraq war, where other countries are invited to join a common effort on terms defined by Washington: the mission defines the coalition, not the other way around. And they believe that the best way to obtain cooperation from other countries is to show resolve : lead, and they will follow eventually. It may not work very well (Europeans didn't end up helping in Iraq, for example), as quickly pointed out by realists, who are less opposed to multilateralism in principle, and liberals, who are committed to multilateralism. Neoconservatives nonetheless share these unilateralist tendencies with other hawks, such as the "assertive nationalists" or sovereigntists in the mold of John Bolton, Dick Cheney or Donald Rumsfeld.

Militarism

To maintain primacy and the ability to act unilaterally, large military capacities are needed. If liberals can find common ground with neocons on the necessity of some foreign interventions, they were never fully comfortable with the use of American power. Neocons share nothing of their hesitations. Rather than a Kantian world where international law, globalization and non-state actors would make war irrelevant in most cases, they see a Hobbesian world in which military force and state actors still play an overwhelming role—a belief which, this time, takes them closer to the realists. It is the fourth neoconservative principle: the importance of retaining massive military resources and the political will to use them. This means that the nation must agree to sustained high levels of defense spending; no year passes by without neoconservatives calling for a major increase of the Pentagon budget and the number of U.S. troops. This view, of course, puts neoconservatives at odds with fiscal conservatives, including in the Republican camp, who worry about deficits. It also puts them at odds with observers on the left who argue that America should spend less on guns and more on butter. Unsurprisingly, the recent healthcare reform was criticized by neocons for endangering the federal government's long-term ability to fund America's military superiority.[12] This love affair with the American military machine has another aspect to it: the tendency to inflate threats to national security, either out of genuine concern or as a way to mobilize public opinion. From the Committee on the Present Danger of the 1970s to the Rumsfeld Commission on the ballistic missile threat in 1998 and the agitation around Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in 2002-2003, neoconservatives have often succumbed to unwarranted alarmism.

Democracy

Democracy is the fifth principle, but in no way a mere afterthought. Because America's origins and identity as a nation cannot be separated from democracy, it should not behave like other powers, and can never remain indifferent to the nature of regimes and the fate of freedom and human rights. That conviction is not exclusive to the neoconservatives, it is shared with

[12] See Max Boot, "ObamaCare and American Power," *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2010.

many on the left, and not only the liberal hawks. The Clinton administration, for example, put the enlargement of the democratic world at the center of its strategy and in 2000 established the Community of Democracies as an international forum to foster cooperation among democracies. But the particularity of neoconservatives is to blend this conviction with the muscular assertion of American power—a mix Pierre Hassner aptly labeled "Wilsonianism in boots."[13] In their eyes, what is true morally is also valid strategically. While realists argue that autocracies and democracies do not behave differently in international relations, and that the United States can make deals with both types of regimes, neoconservatives see a very different picture: a world in which wars, proliferation and terrorism derive principally from tyrannical regimes. Consequently, they believe, it is utterly unrealistic, in the long term, to accommodate autocracies rather than try to achieve regime change—whether in the USSR, Iraq, Iran or North Korea.

As George W. Bush explained in 2003, "the world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder." In 2005, he put the point in even more theoretical terms: "The advance of freedom within nations will build the peace among nations."[14] While academics have produced multiple quantitative studies to test the democratic peace theory in recent decades, the neocons always considered that, as Charles Krauthammer put it, "democracies are inherently more friendly to the United States, less belligerent to their neighbors, and generally more inclined to peace." Realists, he added, "are right that to protect your interests you often have to go around the world bashing bad guys over the head. But that technique, no matter how satisfying, has its limits. At some point, you have to implant something, something organic and self-developing. And that something is democracy."[15]

This does not mean that neocons want to impose democracy at the point of a gun, as their critics often charge. "Exporting democracy" was never the primary goal of the Iraq invasion. But dismissing it as an *ex-post facto* justification is equally inaccurate. In fact, the lack of democracy was considered a key explanation for the instability of the Middle East by the neocons and the Bush administration, so it had to be addressed if America wanted to treat the disease of terrorism, proliferation and rogue states, and not just the symptoms—and it also happened to be the right thing to do in principle. Neoconservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz believed that democracy could flourish there, against the warnings of most conservatives and many realists who argued that culture and religion would prevent it. Like most liberals, and unlike cultural conservatives, a majority of neoconservatives are universalists. They consider that democracy and human rights are for everybody, regardless of their cultural background. They have little time for the clash of civilizations paradigm and see the world in terms of ideology, not identity. Because they blend universalism with nationalism, with a zest of missionary zeal, they resemble the Jacobins of the French Revolution.

It would be wrong to see these five pillars as abstract or ideological prescriptions detached from reality. Neocons see this set of principles as concrete guidelines validated by history, and one would not understand their foreign policy beliefs without immersing oneself in their (debatable) interpretation of some key events of the past. To cite just a few examples: Victory against the U.S.S.R. was won by the uncompromising and muscular stance adopted by Ronald Reagan (advised by many Scoop Jackson Democrats). America was attacked on 9/11 because it had shown weakness each time the terrorists struck, from Lebanon (1983) to New York (1993), Saudi Arabia (1996) and East Africa (1998). The Iraq invasion of 2003 was more costly and more

[13] Pierre Hassner, "The United States: the empire of force or the force of empire?" *Chaillot Paper* No 54, September 2002 page 43, available at <http://www.iss.europa.eu/nc/actualites/actualite/browse/52/article/the-united-states-the-empire-of-force-or-the-force-of-empire/>.

[14] George W. Bush, speech of 26 February 2003 at the American Enterprise Institute, and of 21 February 2005 in Brussels. Available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2009/01/>.

[15] Charles Krauthammer, "Democratic Realism," op.cit.

difficult than first hoped, but it did eventually turn the country into a democracy. Moreover, the Iraq intervention led Libya to give up its WMD out of fear it would suffer the same fate. It also ushered in a new era of democratic movements in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon—and if they have not all succeeded yet, they will eventually.[16]

Reasons for resilience: why neocons are still influential

Far from being some curious isolated cult, neoconservatives are therefore an integral part of current American foreign policy debates, with realists and liberals as their main sparring partners.[17] And while some consider them to have been discredited by the outcome of the Iraq war, a fresh look at their substantial presence and intellectual and political dynamism in Washington suggests otherwise. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that they will not play a significant role in the future of American foreign policy.

First of all, schools of thought are made of men and women, as well as institutions that support them and publications that relay their views and shape the public debate. On this count, neoconservatives are well positioned. Skilled thinkers and writers are in large supply. There is the still active older generation, the Scoop Jackson Democrats, including Norman Podhoretz, Elliott Abrams, Joshua Muravchik, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz and James Woolsey. There is also the more recent family of neocons, including Kristol and Kagan, David Brooks, Gary Schmitt, Tom Donnelly, David Frum and Danielle Pletka. But more importantly for the future, there are also men and women in their 40s, 30s and even 20s, whose formative experience is not the Cold War, but the 1990s and, more to the point, 9/11 and the Bush administration's response. They include Max Boot, Dan Senor, Jamie Fly, Rachel Hoff, Abe Greenwald and Daniel Halper. In this sense, neoconservatism is regenerating itself and keeping a balanced age pyramid. After all, its idealistic, moralistic and patriotic appeal may be better suited to attract young thinkers than the prudent and reasonable calculations of realism.

These younger neoconservative thinkers and operatives have generally received their first internships and jobs, and published their first articles, in the old network of friendly think tanks and publications built by their elders: the American Enterprise Institute, the Hudson Institute, PNAC, *Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard*, the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, and so on. Financial support for these institutions from various conservative donors and foundations such as the Scaife family, Bradley, Earhart, Castle Rock, and Smith Richardson foundations (which do not necessarily give only to neoconservatives), shows no sign of abating. But demographic dynamism is also true in terms of institutions and publications. The Foundation for the Defense of Democracies was founded by Cliff May and others in 2001, and houses young and old neocons —from Reuel Gerecht to Michael Ledeen. More importantly, the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) was created in the Spring of 2009, under the tutelage of Bill Kristol, Robert Kagan and Dan Senor. Animated by young operatives, it is already making its mark on the Afghanistan and human rights debates, notably by sending public letters signed by neocons and non-neocons alike, a technique used by PNAC in the past. In 2008, Lawrence Kaplan re-launched an old magazine that had disappeared, *World Affairs*, which is not exclusively neoconservative (its editorial board is ideologically diverse), but does feature many neocons and liberal hawks such as Joshua Muravchik and Peter Beinart. Other, older, publications

[16] For a rebuttal of neoconservative historiography, see Christopher J. Fettweis, "Dangerous Revisionism: On the Founders, 'Neocons' and the Importance of History," *Orbis* 53 (Summer 2009): 507–523; and David Hoogland Noon, "Cold War Revival: Neoconservatives and Historical Memory in the War on Terror," *American Studies* 48 (Fall 2007): 75–99.

[17] For examples of debates between neocons and the two other schools, see Joshua Muravchik and Stephen M. Walt, "The Neocons vs. The Realists," *The National Interest*, September 3, 2008, available at <http://www.nationalinterest.org/PrinterFriendly.aspx?id=19672>; Paul Wolfowitz, "Think Again: Realism," *Foreign Policy*, September-October 2009, available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/17/think_again_realism?page=full>; and the reply on *Foreign Policy* website by Stephen M. Walt, David J. Rothkopf, Daniel W. Drezner and Steve Clemons, "Is Paul Wolfowitz for Real?" available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/27/why_paul_wolfowitz_should_get_real?page=full>.

sympathetic to the neoconservatives and the liberal hawks include *The New Republic* under Martin Peretz, and the editorial pages of the *The Washington Post* where Charles Krauthammer has a weekly column and Bob Kagan and Bill Kristol each have a monthly one, and where Fred Hiatt and Jackson Diehl, who edit the editorial pages, have created a friendly environment for neoconservative themes.

Demographic and institutional dynamism would not mean much without intellectual firepower. Neoconservatives do not write for themselves, they take part in the larger debate about U.S. foreign policy in mainstream publications and thereby influence public opinion and, more importantly, elite views. While there have been few conceptual innovations since the resurgence of neoconservatism—the five basic principles outlined above were by and large present in Kristol and Kagan's 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article[18]—that is largely true as well for other schools of thought like realism. And neoconservative thinkers sometimes produce articles and books which make their mark on the foreign policy debate. In 2008 for example, Robert Kagan's *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, which described the emerging international landscape as a struggle between the forces of democracy and the increasingly assertive and confident forces of autocracy (led by China and Russia), was an influential book in the United States and beyond, six years after his "Power and Weakness" article had redefined the terms of the debate on transatlantic relations.[19] At a more tactical level, the surge of troops in Iraq in 2007 was partly devised by his brother Fred Kagan working at the American Enterprise Institute—along with retired General Jack Keane and the military commanders David Petraeus and Raymond Odierno. Fred Kagan is also an important voice on the current counter-insurgency debates (along with other neoconservatives such as Max Boot and Tom Donnelly) and was, for example, part of the team of civilian experts who advised General McChrystal on his Afghanistan review in July 2009.

Their intellectual dynamism does not mean, of course, that neoconservatives are influential in the current context of the Obama administration. Obama's foreign policy team is made up of liberals and realists whose positions are far from those of the neocons. However, opposition is not total. Not only are neoconservatives sometimes joining forces with liberal groups on human rights issues (against the realists), or engaging in conversations with senior administration officials, but they lined up behind the administration war effort in Afghanistan—this time against the liberal left and some realists in both parties.[20] Like they did in the second half of the 1990s, when they were fighting creeping isolationism on the Balkans among Republican ranks, the neocons and in particular FPI is leading the charge against conservative "defeatists"—for example *The Washington Post* columnist George Will—in favor of a Democratic President they oppose on most other issues.[21]

This campaign against George Will leads us to another aspect of their influence—this time in the political arena. Whereas FPI was set up to fight the post-Bush backlash in foreign policy, in particular inside the Republican Party, there seems to be very little reaction against muscular interventionism in the GOP. On the contrary, neoconservatism, rather than realism, seems to have won the battle for the soul of the party. And if not neoconservatism per se (the base of the GOP is less internationalist than the

[18] Kristol, Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," op. cit.

[19] Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, New York: Knopf, 2008; "Power and Weakness," *Policy Review*, June-July 2002.

[20] Michael McFaul (senior director of for Russia and Eurasia at the National Security Council) was present at the first annual conference of the Foreign Policy Initiative on September 21, 2009, to discuss Russia, see <http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/advancing-and-defending-democracy/russia-roadblocks-to-reset>. See also example Robert Kagan, Bill Kristol, "Support the President. Beyond the Squabbling and Behind the Mission," *The Weekly Standard*, 14 December 2009, available at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/content/public/articles/000/000/017/307lxxjy.asp>.

[21] George Will, "Time to Get Out of Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, September 1, 2009, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/31/AR2009083102912.html>. Will drew vigorous responses from most prominent neoconservatives, and the first annual conference of the Foreign Policy Initiative (featuring Kristol, Kagan, but also republican Senators John McCain and John Kyl, Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich and others) was largely devoted to expressing support to an increase of the effort in Afghanistan. See <http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/event/advancing-and-defending-democracy-summary>. FPI also encouraged briefings by pro-intervention Afghanistan experts on the Hill.

neocons), at least a hawkish version of foreign policy is prevailing among Republicans—while Democrats and Independents seem firmly in the liberal and realist camp. For example, according to a Pew poll in 2009, a majority of Democrats say decreasing the U.S. military presence overseas (62%) and stepping up diplomatic efforts in Muslim countries (57%), a combination which can be described as being close to the prescriptions of liberals and realists, would have a greater impact in reducing the terrorist threat. Republicans disagree: 62% say that increasing the U.S. military presence abroad is the right answer, while only 22% think that stepping up diplomatic efforts will change anything—a combination which reflects the view of hawks and neocons.[22]

Realists do not dominate the top of the Republican Party either. Two of the leading candidates for the 2008 presidential nomination, Rudy Giuliani and John McCain, had many neoconservative advisors on their staffs. John McCain, who ultimately won the nomination, relied on Randy Scheunemann to head his foreign-policy team, which included Max Boot, Robert Kagan, Gary Schmitt, and James Woolsey—and his foreign policy program included many neoconservative ideas such as the creation of a League of Democracies or a hard line on Russia (for example, expulsion from the G-8 and increased support for Georgia). In Spring 2009, former vice-president Dick Cheney, a close ally of the neocons, questioned whether Colin Powell, his former colleague in the Bush administration and a leading voice of the realist camp, was still a Republican, saying he thought he "had already left the party."[23]

Of course, this does not automatically guarantee that the neocons will be influential in 2012. Much will depend on who gets the nomination. In this regard, an interesting division has played out regarding Sarah Palin, the vice-presidential nominee of 2008. While Bill Kristol is credited with having "discovered" her, and Randy Scheunemann is currently advising her on foreign policy, she was opposed by other neoconservatives (including David Frum, Charles Krauthammer and David Brooks) who regarded her as insufficiently qualified in foreign and security policy. And more recently, Bill Kristol voiced concern that she was too close to the libertarian—and partly isolationist—wing of the conservative movement (the tea party activists and Rand Paul).[24] Ultimately, it seems likely that even a more realist-oriented GOP candidate in 2012 would try to include all the different families of conservatives in his team, as George W. Bush did in 1999-2000 when he included Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle among the "Vulcans," his foreign policy advisors.[25]

Neoconservatives also enjoy a temporary situational advantage in the Republican Party. Obama's foreign policy, through its willingness to engage in dialogue and negotiations with other powers, including autocracies, and its quieter voice on human rights issues, has claimed the terrain of the realists. So if Republicans want to oppose Obama on foreign policy to score political points, they naturally tend to gravitate around neoconservative ideas. Neocons, in other words, offer the most clear-cut alternative to the current administration. Good examples include recent articles by Charles Krauthammer and Bob Kagan.[26] Both attack what they consider to be Obama's underlying assumption, America's inevitable decline, as well as his remedy, adapting to a "post-American world" by accommodating other great powers (most of them autocracies) at the expense of traditional

[22] Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Obama faces familiar divisions over anti-terror policies," February 18, 2009, available at <http://people-press.org/report/493/obama-anti-terror-policies>.
[23] Janie Lorber, "Cheney's Model Republican: More Limbaugh, Less Powell," *New York Times*, May 10, 2009.
[24] See Mark Leibovich, "Palin, Visible and Vocal, Is Positioned for Variety of Roles," *New York Times*, February 5, 2010.
[25] See James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*, New York: Viking, 2004.
[26] Charles Krauthammer, "Decline Is a Choice. The New Liberalism and the End of American Ascendancy," *The Weekly Standard*, October 19, 2009, available at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/017/056lfnpr.asp>, and Robert Kagan, "Obama's Year One: Contra," *World Affairs*, January-February 2010, available at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/articles/2010-JanFeb/full-Kagan-JF-2010.html>.

allies (most of them democracies). It is the epic 1970s fight between Scoop Jackson Democrats and liberals and realists all over again: Krauthammer attacks Obama's lack of patriotism and his supposedly apologetic approach ("For the New Liberalism, it is not just that power corrupts. It is that America itself is corrupt"), while Kagan compares him to Kissinger, who was also assailed by neoconservatives for managing America's decline in the post-Vietnam era through détente rather than stand up to the USSR. To which both add liberal naiveté as a fatal flaw.

The final reason for neoconservative resilience—this time in the medium and long term—is cyclical. While cycles in American foreign policy are a subject of academic controversy, there is no doubt that U.S. diplomacy features moments of extraversion and (sometimes muscular) engagement succeeded by moments of introversion or retrenchment.[27] Neoconservatives, always in opposition during the latter (the 1970s, the 1990s, perhaps the 2010s as well), have been most influential during the former, especially the years 1981-1985 and the years 2001-2005. It is hard to imagine that future winds will not bring the mix of assertiveness, patriotism and self-righteousness that undergirds such moments. Even in the shorter term, there exist predispositions in the American national character that will create frustration with Obama's current realist and pragmatic stance: the preference for a can-do and proactive approach to fixing problems rather than managing them; the refusal to accept a normal, rather than exceptional, America; the restlessness vis-à-vis dependence on others; and the moral idealism which will grow tired of the seemingly cynical games of great power politics. This frustration will inevitably create a more congenial environment for the neocons.

This, of course, does not mean that neoconservatives have recipes which will be any more effective to guide America in the current world. From the inherent limits of military power to the difficulties of nation-building, and from the increasing influence of rising powers to America's long-term budgetary constraints, neoconservative ideas will be hard-pressed to prove they can make a difference. They will be all the more challenged in that they will be accused of having accelerated America's relative decline during the 2000s. But this in no way guarantees that they will not be back.

[27] On cycles, see, among others, Frank Klingberg, *Cyclical Trends in American Foreign Policy Moods: the Unfolding of America's World Role*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983.

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