

## **The Revival of Neoconservatives<sup>1</sup>**

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In 1996, Norman Podhoretz announced the collapse of the neoconservative movement. In an article published in *Commentary*, Podhoretz argued that neoconservatism was dead because it was very difficult to distinguish it from other political expressions ("Neoconservatism" 19). History, the tyrant of the social scientist, has proved once again that Podhoretz was wrong. George W. Bush's ascent to the White House marked the return of neoconservatives to high-level positions within the American government; and after September 11, they entrenched themselves deeper into the government and their influence expanded to American society. Throughout many years, neoconservatives have worked hard to construct a view that would help the United States government to justify its unilateral position in foreign affairs. Therefore, the comprehension of neoconservative ideas is an important prerequisite to understand the role and power of those ideas behind American war against Iraq, and the dominant tendencies of American foreign policy in the current Bush administration.

In this essay, I will try to answer three main questions. First, what explains the revival of neoconservatism? Second, how did September 11 affect neoconservatives' fortune? Third, what are the limits of neoconservative ideas? In doing so, I will uncover the myth that neoconservatives have created lately, the myth of the Islamic threat. After answering these questions, I will present some concluding remarks. But before I proceed, let me offer my understanding of the term neoconservatism. My comprehension of neoconservatism includes five interconnected elements.

1) Neoconservatism is a movement of intellectuals, politicians, and journalists of national reputation.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a presentation delivered in November 2002 at the Turkish American Studies Association.

2) Ideologically speaking, neoconservatism is a centrist liberal expression of people "who endorse the main components of the New Deal liberalism, but reject Lyndon Johnson's great society program" (Greenberg 103).

3) It is a movement defined by specific sequence of historical events that started with their participation as radicals in the 1930s, centrist liberals in the 1950s, neoconservatives in the 1960s, and in the 1990s the leaders of the second generation of neoconservatives came to the forefront.

4) It is a movement that has five basic institutions: The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), The Committee for the Free World (CFW), The Committee for the Present Danger (CPD), and fifth Frank J. Gaffney's Center for Security Policy.

5) Neoconservatives have five main journals: *Commentary*, *The Public Interest*, *The National Interest*, *The New Criterion*, and *the Weekly Standard*.

Having thus stated my understanding of neoconservatism, I'd like to turn to my first question.

### **What Explains the Neoconservative Revival?**

I have two answers to this question, one short and one long. The short answer is the arrival of George W. Bush to the White House. Through the direct recommendation of neocon-friendly Dick Cheney to President Bush, neoconservatives were placed in high-level positions within the American government, in particular within the Defense Department and to a lesser extent in the National Security Council. As members of the Bush administration, they became, at least partially, responsible for the design and implementation of American foreign policy. The long answer is related to what happened to neoconservatives in the 1990s.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall left neoconservatives in a political void, in particular with regard to foreign policy issues. As Seymour Martin Lipset has asserted, for a long time, the common link among neoconservatives was their "past involvement in the struggle against communism as anti-Stalinists in radical movements or as liberal opponents of communist dominated factions in sections of the Democratic Party where the communists were once strong, e.g. the state of Washington, Minnesota and New York."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, "Neoconservatives: Intellectuals on the Right." Unpublished paper, 1993.

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However, with the end of the Cold War, neoconservatives lost their enemy, their threat, their main concern, and in a way, their reason for existence. They were, in a nutshell, rebels without cause. It is not strange that during the 1990s, with the arrival of Bill Clinton to the White House, neoconservative politicians were out of power, and neoconservative intellectuals were fundamentally fighting cultural wars.

During the 1990s neoconservatives criticized the isolationist foreign policy adopted by the United States. "The absence of 'chief danger'," asserted Norman Podhoretz, "has provoked an isolationist foreign policy that seriously threatens American hegemony in the world" ("How to Win"). As a result of this concern, in 1997, neoconservatives launched the *Project for the New American Century*, a project that demanded an active involvement of the United States in foreign affairs. Among the signers of the Statement of Principles,<sup>3</sup> we find many neoconservative politicians or politicians sympathetic to neoconservative views that currently hold high-level positions in the Bush administration such as: Elliot Abrams, Dick Cheney, Paula Dobriansky, Zalmay Khalilzad, I. Lewis Liby, Peter W. Rodman, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz. We also discover neoconservative intellectuals or intellectuals supportive of neoconservative views like: Midge Decter, Elliot A. Cohen, Aaron Friedberg, Norman Podhoretz, Stephen P. Rosen, and Henry S. Rowen. It is interesting to observe that among the signers of the Statement of Principles we do not find any intellectuals of the first generation of neoconservatives, such as Samuel P. Huntington, Hilton Kramer, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, Irving Kristol, Seymour Martin Lipset, or James Q. Wilson, which reveals a new dominant group within this movement, more conservative and politically oriented and less intellectually guided. The same document outlined the notion of preemptive attack. "The history of the 20th century," they sustain, "should have taught us that it is important to shape circumstances before crisis emerge, and to meet threats before they become dire." In all, when neoconservatives were out of power in the 1990s, they were promoting what is part of the foreign policy position of the current Bush administration.

Likewise, Samuel Huntington's books *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*, and *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* provided an intellectual framework to neoconservative political views. I am not going to review these books here, but I should highlight three

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<sup>3</sup> See <<http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm>>.

main ideas: 1) first, Huntington argued that Americans have built their creedal identity in contrast to an unacceptable other, such as international communism; 2) second, there is a Clash of Civilizations between the west and the rest (183); 3) third, the United States and Western Europe are almost in a war with all kinds of Islamism. Huntington's ideas served, at least, two important functions for the neoconservative movement. First, in a way, they predicted what happened on September 11, thereby legitimizing neoconservative views. Second, their views were also opportune. However, before the terrorist attacks these ideas did not have a constituency; they were a minority view within the United States. Neoconservatives had to wait until September 11 to make their ideas resonate politically.

### **How Did September 11 Affect the Fortune of the Neo-conservatives?**

Again, there is a short and a long answer. The short answer is that September 11 reinforced neoconservatives' credibility because what they said would happen happened. The long answer is that September 11 provided neoconservatives with the pretext of a new international threat in the form of international terrorism.

Thus, suddenly after September 11, neoconservatives found an enemy, a dangerous adversary, and for a few days, an invisible threat. Neoconservatives, therefore, found what they had been seeking for years, an international menace. The terrorist attacks permitted them to politically capitalize on a tragic event, allowing them to present a conservative view with minimum opposition from the American society.

After the terrorist assaults, extreme neoconservatives started claiming with more assertiveness that the main enemy of the United States was Islam. Some of their viewpoints show a clear conspiratorial perspective. Daniel Pipes (the son of the eminent historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, Richard Pipes) claims that militant Islam or Islamism has always tried to dominate the United States. To prove his assertion, he refers to a document written by missionaries who arrived in the United States in the 1920s. According to Pipes, these missionaries stated, "our plan is, we are going to conquer America" ("Danger Within" 20). Norman Podhoretz goes much further. He argues that there is something intrinsic to Islam that "has become an especially fertile breeding-ground of terrorism in our time" ("How to Win" 27). For Podhoretz, what legitimates people like Osama Bin

Laden is the "obligation imposed by the Qur'an to wage the Holy War, or jihad, against the infidels" ("How to Win" 27-28). In the words of Pipes, Islamism threatens the West because it is a political ideology that "aspires to create a new order." Consequently, Islam should be confronted. "The United States," claims Podhoretz, "has entered World War IV, a war that will reshape the entire world" ("How to Win" 28).

Neoconservatives, thus, have constructed a myth about the Islamic threat that has at least six basic components. First, Islamism has always tried to conquer the United States. There is, therefore, an Islamic conspiracy against the United States. Second, Islamism is not only threatening the United States, but also the entire Western World. Third, Islamism and terrorism are indistinguishable concepts; they are synonymous. Fourth, Islamism is intrinsically a violent creed, a religion that promotes violence. Fifth, Islamism wants to transform the world, to create a new world order. Sixth, Islamism should be confronted not with rhetoric but with weapons. For neoconservatives, therefore, Islamism is a monolithic creed, with no internal difference, that has the capacity to conquer (I assume militarily) not only the United States, but the entire Western World. This assertion raises several questions: first, why, since the 1920s, have we not witnessed an Islamic plot in the US? Second, does Islamism or the Islamic countries have the capacity to defeat the number one military power of the world? The answers to these questions are not very clear. Under these lenses, events such as the war with Afghanistan or the invasion of Iraq become an unavoidable task and a moral obligation to save the Western world.

### **What are the Limits to Neoconservative Ideas?**

During the last year or so, neoconservative ideas have faced in different moments and with diverse intensity, three distinct kinds of oppositions: institutional, international, and societal.

First, institutionally speaking, the answer is a struggle between the Department of State and Department of Defense. There are two main reasons for this conflict: first, the different characteristics and duties that each of these departments has historically fulfilled; second, the conflicting positions and views of the preeminent people in charge of foreign and defense policy. I am not going to discuss here the structural differences between the Department of State and the Department of Defense, but I will emphasize two points. First, the Department of State is in charge of diplomatic

relations; therefore, its constituency is in other countries. On the other hand, the Department of Defense is in charge of American military affairs, of the defense of American territory and its people. Second, the difficulties increase during periods of military conflict, because both departments are heavily involved in the war-making process.

This inter-bureaucratic struggle has been reinforced by President Bush's appointment of Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell as Secretaries of Defense and State, respectively. Since the 1970s, Rumsfeld has been very sympathetic to neoconservative views. He was quite close to the Committee on the Present Danger and became an honorary member of the Committee for the Free World, an organization of the early 1980s led by Midge Decter. He was also a founder of the neoconservative *Project for the New American Century*. Therefore, it is not strange that the Defense Policy Board (an office created to provide advice to the Secretary and Undersecretary of Defense) is composed of several members of neoconservative organizations or people influenced by neoconservatives such as Richard Perle (until very recently the chairman of the Board mentioned) Richard Allen, Martin Anderson, Fred Ikle, James Schlessinger, George P. Schultz.

On the other hand, Powell is a moderate military man who worked for Bush's father and conducted the Gulf War in the Middle East in 1991. Powell was a key player in persuading Bush's father not to send ground forces to Baghdad in the Gulf War. In the current Republican administration, he was the main promoter of the view that the United States should go to war only with the support of the United Nations. Rumsfeld, filled some of the most important positions with neoconservatives or people sympathetic to neoconservative views, while Powell appointed liberals or conservative establishment professionals. Neoconservatives, therefore, control the Defense Department and moderate conservatives control the State Department.

However, two or three months before the American invasion of Iraq, Powell became closer and closer to the dominant views of the Defense Department. In the different international scenarios like the United Nations, Powell had to defend the hard-line position of the Bush administration. The American decision to unilaterally go to war with Iraq made Powell the main loser in this bureaucratic struggle. During the war and even in the earlier moments of the conflagration, the United States talked with one voice.

Internationally speaking, the main limits to neoconservative ideas were in the United Nations, in particular with the opposition of France, Germany,

and Russia to an American unilateral invasion of Iraq. These countries, for their own particular reasons, rejected the American posture, and France even threatened to veto an American-sponsored Security Council resolution to invade Iraq. The United States withdrew the resolution from the Security Council and considered itself to have enough reasons to launch a unilateral attack on Iraq, bypassing the authority of the United Nations. This action, not only had serious repercussions within the United Nations which was unable to stop American decision to go to war, but also divided the European Union. After the invasion, the Bush administration has worked to reconstruct its relationships with some European countries.

Finally, in the status quo, American and international civil society are important opponents to neoconservative views. The United States launched the war against Iraq asserting three different things:

a) Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, in particular chemical and biological weapons, and was negotiating with African nations for the acquisition of uranium. Therefore, a nuclear threat was on its way.

b) Saddam Hussein's regime has supported international terrorism, and frequently Al-Qaeda.

c) Hussein is a threat to the international community; therefore the United States should launch a preemptive attack to remove Hussein from power.

Likewise, the Bush administration sustained that American military superiority combined with the Iraqi popular rejection of Saddam Hussein were two elements that guaranteed that the war would be short and with low civil casualties. However, the outcome of the conflagration was not as expected. Although the war was relatively short, it still lasted, and in a way still lasts, longer than predicted. The Iraqi people were not overwhelmingly supportive of American troops. Even several months after President Bush declared the end of hostilities, American soldiers died every week on Iraqi soil. US intelligent weapons were not so intelligent because they killed many civilians, provoking the indignation of the international community. The Bush administration still has not presented any hard evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. To go to war with Iraq, apparently, was not a strategic military decision based on hard evidence that Iraq was a threat to the United States and the West, but a political decision based on particular perception of threat that the Bush administration and neoconservatives had.

Before the war, millions of people around the world marched to protest American intentions to invade Iraq. On January 19, 2003, 500,000 people gathered in Washington D.C. to express their opposition to the war. According to some newspaper sources, 10 million people rallied on February 15 in different parts of the world, protesting against the war. Evidently the voice of these people was not heard by the American authorities. However, it is clear that the international community and American voters are some of the forces that can stop the advance of neoconservative ideas.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this essay, I have presented some ideas to explain the revival of the neoconservative movement in the United States. In my analysis, I have asserted that the arrival of the George W. Bush to the White House brought neoconservative politicians to high-level positions in the American government. September 11 reinforced neoconservatives' presence in the American government and society and enabled them to become the dominant force within American foreign policy establishment. From the months preceding the invasion of Iraq to the present time, American foreign policy has been conducted under neoconservative guidelines.

In the last two decades or so, neoconservatism has changed substantially. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was a movement that included a distinguished group of intellectuals in American social sciences. Some of their members, such as Samuel Huntington, James Q. Wilson or Seymour Martin Lipset were presidents of the American Political Science Association and Lipset was also the president of the American Sociological Association. Their books and articles were important contribution to our understanding of American politics and culture. However, the second generation of neoconservatives that currently lead the movement is a group of very important politicians, but not a circle of prominent intellectuals. People like William Kristol, Daniel Pipes, or John Podhoretz, are far away from the knowledge, erudition, and credentials of their parents (Irving Kristol, and Gertrude Himelfarb, Richard Pipes or Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter). A significant difference between the old neoconservatism and the new one is the lack of intellectual preeminence.

At present, the neoconservative movement is fundamentally a part of the Republican Party. Originally, neoconservatism was born and grew as a



part of the Democratic Party. The Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM) the first neoconservative organization, was a faction within the Democratic Party that seriously opposed the nomination of George McGovern to the Presidency. What we have witnessed since then is a slow but constant shift from the Democratic to the Republican Party. Today, neoconservatives are not only an important group within the Republican Party, but a central voice in the policy design of this political organization.

It is clear that, the defeat of Saddam Hussein has not yet solved many of the problems that propelled the United States to invade Iraq. If the original idea was to fight international terrorism and to make the United States a safe land, American preemptive attack was not the best decision. The fight against international terrorism would be possible only with diplomacy, intelligence and international cooperation. The use of weapons against other countries does not guarantee the end of terrorism. On the contrary, we might see a backlash of international terrorism that could be stirred by some countries or fanatic organizations to oppose the United States.

The invasion of Iraq is strengthening nationalist and Islamist sentiments in several countries of the Middle East, increasing the perception of the United States as the "evil empire." The anti-American position will certainly affect the ambitions of the United States to democratize and play a more active role in the region. In a similar vein, it is possible that the American policy of preemptive attack will provoke not the disarmament but the building of weapons of mass destruction in some countries. It is a two-way street. Libya has disarmed, but Iran and North Korea—the two remaining members of Bush's "Axis of Evil"—are pursuing WMD at top speed. Accordingly, it seems that one of the ways to persuade the United States not to use preemptive attacks is to have powerful weapons to fight back. At least, this is one of the readings that can be made from the more conciliatory measures adopted by the United States against North Korea. Apparently, countries such as Iran are in the process of constructing nuclear reactors. Thus, American policy of preemptive attack could be one of the reasons to make the world more armed and insecure. Likewise, American preemptive attack on Iraq constitutes not only a violation of Article 51 of the United Nations, but a substantial modification in the traditional behavior of countries in foreign affairs. The United States has, therefore, created a very dangerous precedent for future behavior of other countries in foreign policy.

Finally, neoconservative ideas, policy recommendations, and direct participation in the decision-making process have seriously influenced

American foreign policy. The United States, the dominant military power in the world, is conducting its foreign policy according to neoconservative principles. Today, American foreign and domestic policy (in particular with the creation of the Homeland Security Department, which represents the most important bureaucratic transformation since the enactment of the National Security act in 1947) are fundamentally oriented to security issues. It is difficult to predict what is going to be the future of President Bush and neoconservatives in power. What is undeniable is that neoconservatism and the current Republican administration are leaving a profound mark in the history of American foreign affairs.

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