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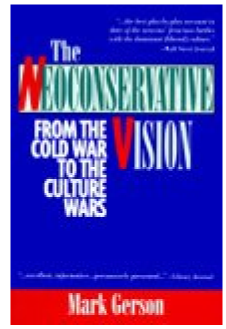


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### The Neoconservatives: The New Vital Center?

Neoconservatism in American politics is a phenomenon that social scientists, especially that majority whose political home remains to the left of center, have never fully understood. The term is regularly misused, primarily in reference to free-market philosophy during the 1980s and 1990s. In this sense, neoconservatism is not properly distinguished from conventional conservatism, or "paleoconservatism," in the parlance of the neoconservative. Neoconservatism refers to a specific intellectual school in the United States descended from the liberal anti-communism of the World War II era and its aftermath. It is distinguished primarily by its rejection of the pronounced radicalism of both the American left in the early years of the Cold War, and early twentieth century conservatism. Neoconservatism is thus not simply another branch of American conservatism; in fact, a substantial majority of its adherents continue to support the Democratic Party, despite their intellectual proximity to the Republican administrations of the 1980s. The 1980s represented, in some ways, the climax of the neoconservative movement, in that its views on such matters as Communism and American foreign policy, welfare, government regulation of the economy, religion in the public sphere, and race relations became part of the conventional wisdom of American political life. To the extent that the Left has resurrected itself, it has done so by embracing many of the arguments of neoconservatism.

In *The Neoconservative Vision*, Mark Gerson presents a detailed synthesis of neoconservative thought, going back to the battles among pro- and anti-Stalin factions within the American socialist movement of the 1930s. In the wake of World War II, democratic socialists were frequently lumped together as "fellow travelers" with pro-Soviet intellectuals. The future neoconservatives resented this association, and quickly came to see the radical Left as more of an enemy than the mainstream Right. Gerson takes his summary of the writings of neoconservatives from Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling, and Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1930s and 1940s through the observations of the likes of Irving Kristol and Michael Novak as they contemplated a world without Communism. Based upon an extensive reading of neoconservative journals and essays (the favored form of neoconservative writing; Gerson observes that neoconservatives write few books) as well as dozens of interviews with major neoconservative personas, Gerson provides an impressive and perhaps unprecedented review of the literature of neoconservatism, one that will make *The Neoconservative Vision* an important reference work for students of political ideologies and American political thought.

The neoconservatives began their political lives as New Dealers, originally opposing the extreme laissez-faire individualism embodied by the Republican Party of the 1920s. These New Dealers rejected traditional conservatism not primarily for economic reasons, but for social ones. Traditional conservatives were white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants who discriminated against all those unlike themselves. The future neoconservatives did not reject the mythology of American life. Rather, as representatives of traditional nineteenth-century immigrant groups like Jews, Polish, Irish, or Slavs, they sought to integrate themselves into American society through the accepted route of hard work and individual achievement, only to find themselves excluded due to their non-British stock. To this day, neoconservatives are disproportionately Jewish and Roman Catholic, the "assimilated" immigrants.

Neoconservative intellectuals treat another group of intellectuals, the "anti-anti-Communists" (later to become the New Left), as their chief antagonists. In the wake of World War II, many Western intellectuals remained enamored of the Soviet Union and "Uncle Joe" Stalin, convinced, as was Walter Lippman in the 1930s, that in the USSR they had "seen the future, and it works." Neoconservatives, the liberal anti-Communists, argued, as did George Orwell in his novel *Animal Farm*, that it was unprecedented for the intellectuals of a democratic country to fall under the sway of a totalitarian ideology. Neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz, editor of the journal *Commentary*, later went on to argue that democracies inherently have difficulties standing up to totalitarian regimes, for these latter ideologies are able to penetrate into democracies and influence political debate.

For American intellectuals, the McCarthy period dominated the 1950s. This was a difficult period for all American leftists, as all were suspected of connections to the Soviets. During the McCarthy hearings, the split between pro-Soviet and anti-Communist liberals became pronounced, as liberal anti-Communists refused to join in the anti-McCarthy hysteria encouraged by the far Left, while opposing McCarthy's witch hunts, claiming that they distracted from the true anti-Communist struggle, the Cold War.

Neoconservatism came into its own during the 1960s and 1970s, and during these decades became a force that would oppose the Left far more than the Right. Neoconservatives view the cultural sphere as the most important one, a sphere from which economics and politics draw their meaning. Therefore, a battle over the definition of American culture is one that neoconservatives view as one for the American soul. The New Left appeared after 1960, with an agenda supporting civil rights, the restructuring of the American university, and opposing the use of American military power overseas on the grounds that the United States lacked the moral legitimacy to act as a global force. Neoconservatives joined the New Left in opposing the Vietnam War, but on the narrower grounds that the war, as defined by the Pentagon, was not winnable, and that the overall strategic interest of the United States in Southeast Asia was questionable. Neoconservatives also supported the civil rights movement, in that it offered the potential for African Americans to join the American mainstream in the same way that their own grandparents did. However, the civil rights movement soon spawned affirmative action programs that offered elaborate racial and gender preferences to traditionally disadvantaged groups. Neoconservatives, sympathetic to individual achievement without regard to membership in a social or racial group, opposed affirmative action for both ideological and self-interested reasons: they believed that the true path to success in the United States was the one taken by their own families, and they were resentful that the discrimination faced by their own families (especially Jewish ones) was repeated, this time as reverse discrimination.

Neoconservative disaffection with the Democrats mounted particularly during the Carter administration after 1976. They saw it as embodying New Left values, and the Iranian hostage crisis and the administration's limp response to it showed that it remained a hostage to the Vietnam syndrome. For these reasons, most neoconservatives supported Ronald Reagan's successful bid for the presidency in 1980. Reagan promised not to be afraid to project American military power and undertook a substantial buildup of American armed forces to send a clear message to the Soviets. At the same time, Reagan turned Washington away from attempts at economic management in the direction of a less fettered capitalist economy, another favorite topic of neoconservatives, still chafing at the resentment many New Left activists harbored toward capitalism and the way of life that upheld it.

While Gerson's historical review of the neoconservative movement illustrates well the reaction of the group to specific periods in American political history, it runs the risk of obscuring the common themes that have animated neoconservatism from the beginning. Above all, neoconservatives stress the centrality of ideology and culture (they are two sides of the same coin for neoconservatives) in determining the course that a society ultimately follows. While paleoconservatives differ from neoconservatives in their apparent lack of interest, and even contempt for, culture, the New Left shows active hostility to an American culture developed over more than two centuries. Neoconservatives believe it is this New Left critique of the United States that is more nefarious and that demands pointed opposition. All neoconservative writing is inspired by this perceived need to protect American culture and the forces that support it.

Neoconservatives believe that politics is about morality, and that morality should infuse political behavior. Democracy thrives upon what they call "the bourgeois virtues" of thrift, the delaying of gratification, honesty, probity, and loyalty. The importance of individual moral responsibility is the flip side of the classical liberal's insistence upon personal freedom and initiative; neoconservatives maintain that each side is needed to make the other work. For example, while material wealth is necessary for a thriving society with a high standard of living, it is not an end in itself. This wealth can be put in the service of the things that truly "matter" in life, such as education and intellectual vitality; civil society, as in those mediating institutions that give society a collective existence independent of the state; and religion. Religion is the source of the moral virtues that animate both individuals and the society in which they live.

This raises the question of the role of religion in public life. In recent decades, under the influence of modern liberalism, the practice of religion within public institutions has been discouraged on the grounds of separation of church and state. Neoconservatives, Jewish and Christian alike, respond that this is too broad a reading of the concept. They note that the Constitution prohibits the establishment of an official state religion but does not say that religion has no place as a motivating force in politics. The state merely cannot do anything for interfere with the individual practice (or non-practice, a point on which neoconservatives do not all agree) of religion. Judeo-Christian morality is the starting point of American culture, and neoconservatives believe that such controversial events as invocations at public school graduations and Nativity scenes on municipal property reflect this morality and do not stop followers of other faiths from practicing them.

Neoconservatives have displayed a religious fervor in their defense of capitalism. In fact, religion and capitalism together create what neoconservatives view as the ideal social order. While most of the paleoconservatives praise capitalism for promoting economic growth and personal freedom, neoconservatives view the market as an ideal mechanism of moral restraint. Libertarian arguments for capitalism point out that the market efficiently translates individual demand into social outcomes. Neoconservatives respond that capitalism, having no values of its own, requires some form of moral background to sustain it, a moral background that is to be found in religion. If a public is infused with religious morality, it will influence consumer demand, meaning that all participants in the economy, if they are to thrive, must acknowledge this morality. Therefore, economics cannot pollute culture, but a corrupt culture can be propagated by the ruthlessly efficient market. Therefore, neoconservatives do not fret over the likes of selfishness and greed–they are moral failures that religion, not socialism or government regulation of the market, will cure.

The neoconservative theologian Michael Novak has put forward a moral defense of capitalism along these lines that seems to have influenced even Pope John Paul II. Keeping in mind that the support that neoconservatives offer to capitalism is more for moral than economic reasons, several writers worry openly that capitalism, an inherently amoral system, is coming to undermine the Judeo-Christian ethic, just as it sustained it in the past. For this reason, Irving Kristol has written that capitalism deserves only two cheers instead of the traditional three. It supports the production of material wealth, and it is the most efficient of economic systems, but it also has the potential to undermine religion and morality by doing nothing to combat a nihilistic ethic of self-indulgence and greed. While neoconservatives are pro-capitalism, they are anything but libertarians.

Indeed, neoconservatives have a diffident attitude toward democracy and freedom. Neither is a good in itself. Rather, they are acceptable only to the extent that they are consistent with the bourgeois virtues. While they oppose totalitarian regimes on the grounds that they impose an all-encompassing ideology upon society, the bourgeois virtues seem to take on the same kind of global role. While castigating New Left intellectuals for lacking touch with the common people, neoconservative intellectuals also complain that the United States is too democratic in its ideology, leading the people to reject the wise advice that neoconservatives are offering them. Similarly, neoconservatives believe that freedom is inherently subject to abuse, with liberty dissolving into license, in the terminology of John Locke. Criticism of the bourgeois virtues ultimately undermines society's institutions, meaning that dissent is a threat to society rather than a vehicle for improving it. Therefore, society is inherently fragile and under constant threat. Perhaps neoconservatives are not aware that they are using a similar argument to that of totalitarian Marxists. Gerson, content merely to summarize neoconservative writings, never addresses this contradiction.

Similarly, what is the role of the intellectual? Traditionally, from the Greeks to the present age, the intellectual has been the force to discomfort the comfortable, the gadfly to shock society out of its complacency. Life is to be examined, not simply to be accepted for what it seems to be. Indeed, through Gerson's words, the neoconservatives dwell upon the consequences of ideas, arguing that what intellectuals debate at their conferences today dictates the shape of society decades down the road. The neoconservatives thus condemn the New Left intellectuals who challenge the accepted institutions of society. Neoconservatives criticize social scientists for putting forward ideas that are not necessarily workable, yet the Canadian neoconservatives David Bercuson and Barry Cooper argue that inventive intellectual suggestions are vital to the political system, and that the give and take of politics, and the inherent need to compromise, generally sand down the most unrealistic edges of intellectuals' prescriptions.[1] From American neoconservatives we again see the belief that to contest society is to destabilize it. Instead, neoconservatives pride themselves upon *celebrating* bourgeois virtues and society's existing institutions. Is this to mean that the intellectual's obligation is to serve merely as a cheerleader for the status quo? Stalin demanded the same of Soviet intellectuals–in what way is this different?

Religion played an important, if not primary, role in the formation of neoconservative thought. Yet the place that religion is to have in the neoconservative vision is far from clear in the text. For example, Gerson frequently writes that neoconservatism is a unique alliance of Jewish and Christian (largely Catholic) intellectuals making a common defense of the Judeo-Christian ethic. In other places, Gerson portrays neoconservatism as a Jewish movement that only begrudgingly tolerates a Catholic presence. In places, Gerson hints that the Jewish neoconservatives welcomed Christian allies when politically useful (such as their courting of the Christian Right, another force that wanted religious morality to direct decisions in the marketplace), but on other occasions depicts Christian conservatives as a threat to Judaism in the United States, such as in a peculiar digression into Irving Kristol's heated opposition to religious intermarriage (p. 302). Is neoconservatism an ideology that is meant to offer something to every American, or does it boil down to the self-interest of Jewish intellectuals? Is affirmative action distasteful because its groupist focus is illiberal, or because it threatens the faculty positions of future Jewish intellectuals? Is U.S. support for Israel laudable because Israel represents an important strategic interest of the United States, or are the neoconservatives merely another manifestation of the Jewish lobby? Once again, the approach of reviewing literature never brings this contradiction into the open, and even in choosing the texts to review, Gerson's text often shows little distinction between the important and the trivial.

As Bill Clinton's "New Democrats" and Tony Blair's "New Labour" preside over a renaissance of the Left in English-speaking democracies, the question of the origin of this post-Reagan Left arises. While Clintonite policies are typically derided as warmed-over Reaganism by the most strident liberals, in many ways, Clinton's administration may well signal the reconciliation of the neoconservatives with the Democratic Party. For example, the Clinton administration has not shied away from the use of the U.S. military, defends welfare but supports measures forcing individuals to seek private employment, and maintains an overall attitude of tempering private activity with concern for its effects on the entire community. Blair's government in Britain is even more open about its support for these traditionally neoconservative themes. The success of Clinton and Blair against paleoconservatives is rudimentary proof that the neoconservatives were more liberal critics of liberalism than converts to conservatism–their ideas were partly responsible for the resurrection of the Left. As 1990s conservatives continue to place economic growth before the health of civil society, Kristol's refusal to give capitalism "a third cheer" seems increasingly valid.

While the analysis is severely underdeveloped, Gerson provides an excellent summarized history of neoconservative thought. For this reason alone, *The Neoconservative Vision* seems to be a prima facie candidate for classroom use. The only problem I foresee in my own courses is where to place it upon a syllabus. Neoconservatism is a rather specialized intellectual school, and as such, does not rate more than cursory attention in introductory classes. In "Contemporary Political Ideologies," my department's first level course in political theory, I already ask my students to read a chapter from Kristol's *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, which is all the time that can be spared for a short course that covers ten distinct ideological systems. "American Political Theory" would be a possible candidate for this book, though again, in this course I focus on primary texts (including Kristol and Novak). Gerson, however, may make useful supplementary reading. Where I see Gerson as being most useful in the classroom is at the graduate level, especially in a seminar on American conservatism or in recent trends in American political thought. Above all, Gerson's detailed summary and bibliography present an interesting and useful overview of neoconservatism for those who intend to go on to more detailed study of the subject.

Notes:

[1]. Bercuson, David and Barry Cooper. *Derailed: The Betrayal of the National Dream.* Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1994, p. 114.



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