

# MYTHS ABOUT NEOCONSERVATISM



**Max Boot**

*By telling... tall tales, critics have twisted the neocons'  
identities and thinking on U.S. foreign policy into  
an unrecognizable caricature.*

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MAX BOOT

## **‘THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION IS PURSUING A NEOCONSERVATIVE FOREIGN POLICY’**

**If only it were true!** The influence of the neoconservative movement (with which I am often associated) supposedly comes from its agents embedded within the U.S. government. The usual suspects are Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense; Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy; Lewis ‘Scooter’ Libby, the Vice President’s chief of staff; Elliott Abrams, the National Security Council staffer for Near East, South-west Asian, and North African Affairs; and Richard Perle, a member of the Defense Policy Board. Each of these policy-makers has been an outspoken advocate for aggressive and, if necessary, unilateral action by the United States to promote democracy, human rights, and free markets, and to maintain U.S. primacy around the world.

While this list seems impressive, it also reveals that the neocons have no representatives in the administration’s top tier. President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice: not a neocon among them. Powell might be best described as a liberal internationalist; the others are traditional national-interest conservatives who, during Bush’s 2000 presidential campaign, derided the Clinton administration for its focus on nation-building and human rights. Most of them were highly skeptical of the interventions in the Balkans that neocons championed.

The contention that the neocon faction gained the upper hand in the White House has a superficial plausibility because the Bush administration toppled Saddam Hussein and embraced democracy promotion in the Middle East – both policies long urged by neocons (though not only by neocons) and opposed by self-styled ‘realists’ who believe in fostering stability above all. But the administration has adopted these policies not because of the impact of the

neocons but because of the impact of the four airplanes hijacked on September 11, 2001. Following the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history, Bush realized the United States no longer could afford a 'humble' foreign policy. The ambitious National Security Strategy that the administration issued in September 2002 – with its call for U.S. primacy, the promotion of democracy, and vigorous action, pre-emptive if necessary, to stop terrorism and weapons proliferation – was a quintessentially neoconservative document.

Yet the triumph of neoconservatism was hardly permanent or complete. The administration so far has not adopted neocon arguments to push for regime change in North Korea and Iran. Bush has cooled on the 'axis of evil' talk and has launched negotiations with the regime in North Korea. The President has also established friendlier relations with communist China than many neocons would like, and he launched a high-profile effort to promote a 'road map' for settling the Israeli–Palestinian conflict that most neocons (correctly) predicted would lead nowhere.

### **'NEOCONS ARE LIBERALS WHO HAVE BEEN MUGGED BY REALITY'**

**No longer true.** Original neoconservatives such as Irving Kristol, who memorably defined neocons as liberals who'd been 'mugged by reality', were (and still are) in favor of welfare benefits, racial equality, and many other liberal tenets. But they were driven rightward by the excesses of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when crime was increasing in the United States, the Soviet Union was gaining ground in the Cold War, and the dominant wing of the Democratic Party was unwilling to get tough on either problem.

A few neocons, like philosopher Sidney Hook or Kristol himself, had once been Marxists or Trotskyites. Most, like former UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, simply had been hawkish Democrats who became disenchanted with their party as it drifted further left in the 1970s. Many neocons, such as Richard Perle, originally rallied around Henry 'Scoop' Jackson, a Democratic senator who led the opposition to the Nixon–Ford policy of détente with the Soviet Union. Following the 1980 election, U.S. President Ronald Reagan became the new standard bearer of the neoconservative cause.

A few neocons, like Perle, still identify themselves as Democrats, and a number of 'neoliberals' in the Democratic Party (such as Senator Joseph Lieberman and former UN Ambassador Richard Holbrooke) hold fairly neoconservative views on foreign policy. But most neocons have switched to

the Republican Party. On many issues, they are virtually indistinguishable from other conservatives; their main differences are with libertarians who demonize 'big government' and preach an anything-goes morality.

Most younger members of the neoconservative movement, including some descendants of the first generation, such as William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, and Robert Kagan, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, have never gone through a leftist phase, which makes the 'neo' prefix no longer technically accurate. Like 'liberal', 'conservative', and other ideological labels, 'neocon' has morphed away from its original definition. It has now become an all-purpose term of abuse for anyone deemed to be hawkish, which is why many of those so described shun the label. Wolfowitz prefers to call himself a 'Scoop Jackson Republican'.

### **'NEOCONS ARE JEWS WHO SERVE THE INTERESTS OF ISRAEL'**

**A malicious myth.** With varying degrees of delicacy, everyone from fringe U.S. presidential candidates Lyndon LaRouche and Patrick Buchanan to European news outlets such as the BBC and *Le Monde* have used neocon as a synonym for Jew, focusing on Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Eliot Cohen, and others with obvious Jewish names. Trying to resurrect the old dual-loyalties canard, they cite links between some neocons and the Likud Party to argue that neocons wanted to invade Iraq because they were doing Israel's bidding.

Yes, neocons have links to the Likud Party, but they also have links to the British Tories and other conservative parties around the world, just as some in the Democratic Party have ties to the left-leaning Labour Party in Great Britain and the Labor Party in Israel. These connections reflect ideological, not ethnic, affinity. And while many neocons are Jewish, many are not. Former drug czar Bill Bennett, ex-CIA Director James Woolsey, the Revd Richard John Neuhaus, social scientist James Q. Wilson, theologian Michael Novak, and Jeane Kirkpatrick aren't exactly synagogue-goers. Yet they are as committed to Israel's defense as Jewish neocons are – a commitment based not on shared religion or ethnicity but on shared liberal democratic values. Israel has won the support of most Americans, of all faiths, because it is the only democracy in the Middle East, and because its enemies (Hezbollah, Hamas, Iran, and Syria) also proclaim themselves to be the enemies of the United States.

The charge that neocons are concerned above all with the welfare of Israel is patently false. In the 1980s, they were the leading proponents of democratization in places as disparate as Nicaragua, Poland, and South Korea. In the 1990s, they were the most ardent champions of interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo – missions designed to rescue Muslims, not Jews. Today neocons agitate for democracy in China (even as Israel has sold arms to Beijing!) and against the abuse of Christians in Sudan. Their advocacy of democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan is entirely consistent with this long track record. If neocons were agents of Likud, they would have advocated an invasion not of Iraq or Afghanistan but of Iran, which Israel considers to be the biggest threat to its own security.

### **‘NEOCONS ARE A WELL-FUNDED, WELL-ORGANIZED CABAL’**

**Hardly.** Writers suspicious of neocons have drawn elaborate flow charts to map neoconservative influence, showing the links between journalists (such as Charles Krauthammer and William Kristol), think tanks (the American Enterprise Institute and the Project for the New American Century), and foundations (Bradley, John M. Olin, and Smith Richardson). True, neocons have some support in the media and non-profit worlds. But let’s be serious: the Project for the New American Century, the leading neocon foreign-policy think tank, has a staff of five. Its resources pale next to those of the Brookings Institution, Heritage Foundation, and Cato Institute, three of the biggest Washington think tanks, none of them sympathetic to the neoconservative vision of foreign policy. The Bradley, John M. Olin, and Smith Richardson foundations have given some money to neocons (including me), but their combined grants (\$68 million per year) are less than a tenth of those doled out by just three liberal foundations – Ford, Rockefeller, and MacArthur (\$833 million per year). And funding for neoconservative causes is about to shrink because Olin is going out of business. The leading neoconservative magazines, *The Weekly Standard*, *The Public Interest*, and *Commentary*, have lower circulations than the *National Review*, *The Nation*, or *The New Republic*, to say nothing of *The New Yorker* or *Time*.

Sorry, conspiracy aficionados. Neocons have been relatively influential because of the strength of their arguments, not their connections.

### **‘NEOCONS ARE WILSONIAN IDEALISTS’**

**True**, with an important qualification. The ‘Wilsonian’ label has been haphazardly affixed to anyone who believes that U.S. foreign policy should be guided by the promotion of American ideals, not just the protection of narrowly defined strategic and economic interests, as realpolitikers believe.

But Wilsonians are not all alike. Liberal ‘soft Wilsonians’, such as former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and, previously, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson himself, share a faith that multilateral organizations such as the League of Nations or the United Nations should be the main venues through which the United States promotes its ideals, and that international law should be the United States’ main policy tool. They are willing to use force, but preferably only when (as in Haiti or Kosovo) the intervention is untainted by any hint of national interest.

The neocons have scant regard for Wilson himself, whom they regard as hopelessly naive. Instead, they are ‘hard Wilsonians’, who place their faith not in pieces of paper but in power, specifically U.S. power. Their heroes are Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan – all U.S. presidents who successfully wielded power in the service of a higher purpose. Neocons believe the United States should use force when necessary to champion its ideals as well as its interests, not only out of sheer humanitarianism but also because the spread of liberal democracy improves U.S. security, while crimes against humanity inevitably make the world a more dangerous place.

### **‘NEOCONS ARE TARGETING NORTH KOREA AND IRAN NEXT’**

**True.** The greatest danger to the United States today is the possibility that some rogue state will develop nuclear weapons and then share them with terrorist groups. Iran and North Korea are the two likeliest culprits. Neither would be willing to negotiate away its nuclear arsenal; no treaty would be any trustworthier than the 1994 Agreed Framework that North Korea violated. Neocons think the only way to ensure U.S. security is to topple the tyrannical regimes in Pyongyang and Tehran.

This objective does not mean, however, that neocons are agitating for pre-emptive war. They do not rule out force if necessary. But their preferred solution is to use political, diplomatic, economic, and military pressure, short

of actual war, to bring down these dictators – the same strategy the United States followed with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Iranian and North Korean peoples want to be free; the United States should help them by every means possible, while doing nothing to provide support for their oppressors. Regime change may seem like a radical policy but it is actually the best way to prevent a nuclear crisis that could lead to war. Endless negotiating with these governments – the preferred strategy of self-described pragmatists and moderates – is likely to bring about the very crisis it is meant to avert.

### **‘NEOCONS OPPOSE MULTILATERALISM’**

**False.** Neocons don’t have a problem with alliances. They are wary of granting multilateral institutions (such as the United Nations) a veto over U.S. action, or joining deeply flawed international agreements (such as the landmine convention) simply for the sake of multilateral harmony. But that’s a long way from unilateralism, which, if it means anything, implies a preference for going it alone.

To be sure, a faction within the Republican Party might properly be described as unilateralist. These traditional conservatives believe that the guiding principles of U.S. foreign policy should be, in columnist George Will’s formulation, to: ‘Preserve U.S. sovereignty and freedom of action by marginalizing the United Nations. Reserve military interventions for reasons of U.S. national security, not altruism. Avoid peacekeeping operations that compromise the military’s war-fighting proficiencies. Beware of the political hubris inherent in the intensely unconservative project of “nation-building”.’

Neocons, by contrast, are committed above all to U.S. global leadership, and they know that the costs of such leadership (including peacekeeping and nation-building) are so high that the United States needs allies to share the burden. For this reason, neocons have been vocal advocates of expanding NATO and sending its forces into Afghanistan and Iraq. Like most conservatives, neocons are deeply suspicious of the United Nations, which they fear is animated by anti-Americanism. But, unlike some on the right, they are happy to make common cause with the United Nations when doing so will serve U.S. interests. Some neocons (myself included) are even willing to cede the United Nations some authority in Iraq in order to bring more countries into the coalition.

### ‘NEOCONS ARE POLITICAL FUNDAMENTALISTS’

**Give me a break.** According to some of their more heated critics, neocons view the world in Manichean terms. Guided by the spirits of philosopher Leo Strauss and Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, the neocons allegedly have contempt for the democratic masses and believe in spreading ‘noble lies’ to mislead the public. The ‘exaggerated’ threat posed by Saddam Hussein is cited as their latest deception.

This portrayal is a crude caricature of a group that believes American values are worth defending at home and abroad. That conviction was, in fact, the view of Strauss himself. A largely apolitical Professor of Classics at the University of Chicago who died in 1973, Strauss was a refugee from Nazi Germany who saw the evils of totalitarianism at first hand. He did not propose – as neocon-bashers charge – that a privileged few should run society while deceiving everyone else about their intentions. He was a firm believer in U.S. democracy, which, he thought, needed to be defended by a well-educated elite, lest it go the way of the Weimar Republic. Strauss’s views inspired some early neocons; few read him today, contrary to all the articles asserting that (as the French weekly magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* put it) Strauss is the neocons’ ‘mentor’.

Even more absurd is the charge that the neocons are secret adherents to Trotsky’s theory of the permanent revolution. The former Red Army commander may have opened a few leftists’ eyes to the evils of Stalinism in the 1930s, but he was no proto-neocon. He was a communist, who, even after his expulsion from Russia, remained committed to establishing a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. The only kind of revolution he favored was one that would bring him and his comrades to power. As neocon author Joshua Muravchik has pointed out, Trotsky would not have supported a democratic war of liberation in Iraq; his sympathies would have been with Saddam.

### ‘FAILURE IN IRAQ HAS DISCREDITED THE NEOCONS’

**Too early to say.** The emerging media consensus that the U.S. occupation has fizzled is ludicrously premature. Sure, there have been a lot of well-publicized problems, such as terrorism, crime, and electricity shortages. But a lot of less-publicized progress is also evident – the creation of a Governing Council, the election of city councils and mayors, the emergence of the freest political parties and media in the Arab world, the reconstruction of looted schools and government buildings, and the establishment of a legal framework



for a free-enterprise system. The continuing U.S. casualties are lamentable but the losses so far are low by the standards of guerrilla wars... There is no reason, other than 1960s nostalgia, to expect a Vietnam redux. But if the occupation does turn into a fiasco, as numerous critics expect, the neocons will be a convenient scapegoat.

To a large extent, this blame is unfair. Many of the early problems of the occupation were due to the administration's failure to commit sufficient resources to Iraq. This oversight was largely the fault of policy-makers, such as Rumsfeld, who remain skeptical of nation-building. Neocons have been pushing for a more vigorous nation-building effort in both Afghanistan and Iraq and for a concomitant expansion of the active-duty military to provide the necessary troops. Unfortunately, this advice was largely unheeded by the administration. And when the White House finally realized it needed to spend more on rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan, Republican isolationists and fiscal conservatives in Congress raised obstacles. If neocons had been in control, they would have done far more, far earlier, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, possibly averting some of the post-war problems. But fairly or not, neocons will doubtless be held responsible for the outcome in both countries; their numerous enemies, on both the left and the right, will see to that.

