

**Herodotus' New Histories:**  
**A Look at Neoconservatism through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries**

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\*\*\* Why Neoconservatism? \*\*\*

As an American, and in particular as one who has had the opportunity to spend a good deal of time living and traveling outside of my country, I have often been struck by the fervor with which non-Americans care about America. This is not meant as self-congratulation. It is not that the world is filled with well-wishers and supporters. As should be clear to all by now, much of the world actually opposes American policies and some factions even go so far as to wish for an American downfall. So what do I mean when I say that the world cares? The world cares in the sense that it has a tremendous desire to both understand and affect American policy, particularly foreign policy.

I share this desire. Unfortunately for me and for the rest of the world, very few answers to the questions of *why* America currently acts the way it does and *how* to change that action in the future have been forthcoming, especially in recent years. Interestingly, and I have only very recently arrived at this conclusion myself, I do not think that this gap in comprehension exists entirely because America has not explained itself or because the explanations provided are convenient and wholly self-interested lies, as many have charged. The problem also lies in the fact that those who oppose American policies, whether in Iraq now or during the Cold War, have refused to meet America half way. That is, they do not truly want to understand the *why* of American action, or at least are not willing to engage with the complexities of international politics to the extent that such an understanding would require. They want instead only to see the action change its form. Here, of course, I speak not of the Al Qaeda's of the world, for such groups seek the wholesale destruction of America, but instead of those who accept America in principle, wishing only to see the country become less militarized and less unilateral; noble goals certainly. My perspective is that these groups have, by-and-large, failed to wrestle adequately

with the real justifications for American foreign policy and, in not doing so, may have robbed themselves of the ability to temper said policies, as they (and I) so clearly desire. The purpose of this paper is to do some of that wrestling.

To do so I am taking on neoconservatism, for it is the strand of thought that has most prominently and controversially affected American foreign policy since the start of the Cold War. This is not to say that it is the only influence, far from it, but neoconservatism is the *intellectual* reason for both America's presence in Iraq today and its stiff resistance to the USSR and Communism yesterday.

In taking on neoconservatism my approach was the following:

First, I read only neoconservative thinkers. I did not read the realists, the internationalists, the isolationists, or their critiques of the neoconservatives. In some ways this will bias my paper, because it means that I have absorbed a great deal of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, of which I do not generally consider myself an expert, through a strictly neoconservative lens. Still, this unilateral approach is appropriate because my paper is an attempt to understand neoconservatives' ideas about America's role in the world through their eyes and their eyes only. As such, as much as is possible, I will keep my critiques inter-neocon, that is, of them through them.

Second, I focused only on the neoconservative approach to foreign policy. Many neoconservatives have written about domestic American politics at length, but those politics are not the reason I set out to write this paper and so they will not be treated here.

Third, in order to explore neoconservatism at all, I have had to do some less-than-nuanced bunching of individuals and ideas. This cannot be helped. As with any school of thought, there are variations within neoconservatism. Indeed one could write a whole paper about such differences, especially in the post Cold War period when they start to become

particularly pronounced. Since that is not the paper I am writing, however, I have only addressed differences when I felt that not doing so would compromise my attempts to treat my subject honestly.

### \*\*\* Neoconservatism in Brief \*\*\*

Neoconservative thought is grounded in the belief that man and his perfectibility are inherently limited. This belief is supported by history, particularly by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century histories of World War I and II and by the totalitarianisms of Nazi Germany and the USSR, all of which serve as evidence of man's inability to escape his propensity for tremendous wrongdoing if not outright evil. Of course, limitedness does not amount to a complete inability to improve. Neoconservative thought is also based in the belief that man can improve his situation, just very slowly, painfully, and certainly not indefinitely. America, with its long history of struggle between liberty, equality, and prosperity, provides the evidence here, but, in doing so, also leaves neoconservatism in the midst of a dual world. On the one hand there is man's inherent limit, which often leads him towards evil, and on the other hand there is a slow but powerful progress, which occasionally enables man to do good and live well. In the modern context, the result, especially given that America and only America proved able to stand up to the monsters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is a neoconservative foreign policy framework in which America becomes a purposeful tool. That purpose: to defend the limited liberal gains man has made for himself against a world filled with danger, instability, and human evil.

Whether or not one agrees with this worldview or not, up until the end of the Cold War it must at least be said that neoconservatism remained intellectually consistent in its vision. Post-1991, however, the international landscape becomes so suddenly different that neoconservatives begin to push for America, as the world's newly-minted lone superpower, to permanently close

the door on the evils of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though they do not often say as much, preferring to argue that America should act as a “benevolent global hegemony,”<sup>1</sup> the suppression and thereby elimination of any and all powerful purveyors of evil is essentially the neoconservative aspiration in the post Cold War period. Unfortunately, in aspiring as they do, neoconservatives betray the very basis for their own thought, the belief in the inherently limited nature of man, and, instead, begin to ask more from America than their conservatism or general prudence will allow. The attempt to destroy and then remake Iraq, insofar as it is an attempt to remake not only Iraqi society, which it is first, but also the larger Middle East, which it is more broadly, is the most striking embodiment of this abandonment of the neoconservative foundation.

\*\*\* A Move Right? \*\*\*

Before exploring how neoconservatism abandoned itself, it is necessary to discuss how the thought came to be born in the first place. Pinpointing a starting point is difficult, however, because the various individuals and strands of thought that eventually became neoconservatism did not condense all at once. In fact, it took almost two decades, from the 1950s, when the fathers of neoconservatism first began to express its intellectual underpinnings, until 1973, for the term neoconservative to even be coined.<sup>2</sup> Additionally confusing: though most neoconservatives did start out somewhere on the left, not all moved right at the same time or in response to the same events. Some, including former *Commentary* magazine editor Norman Podhoretz and neoconservative founder Irving Kristol, were socialists in the 1930s and 40s, and, even after disowning Marxism in the wake of World War II, remained committed leftists well into the 50s and early 60s.<sup>3</sup> Men like these broke with the left in response to the social and

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign Policy Debates.” *Commentary*. Pg 31.

<sup>2</sup> Harrington, Michael. “The Welfare State and Its Neoconservative Critics”. *Dissent Magazine* Pg 21-28.

<sup>3</sup> See: Kristol, Irving. “An Autobiographical Memoir.” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography on an Idea*. Pg 1-40. Also: Podhoretz, Norman. “Ex-Friends.” Also: Podhoretz, Norman. “Breaking Ranks.”

political upheavals of the mid to late 1960s and the messages so associated. Others took even longer to make the move. Peter Collier, current editor in chief of the neoconservative publishing house Encounter Books, but also a former leader of the New Left, did not give up his leftist leanings until learning of the Communist crimes that followed the American withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975.<sup>1</sup> Even 9/11, though clearly much later, undoubtedly brought some latecomers to the neoconservative camp. Important in all of this, however, is not so much when the neoconservatives of today made their moves right, but why?

Initial movements away from the left, particularly by neoconservatives with then socialist sympathies, were prompted by the unexpected totalitarianism of Communism, and further, by the unwillingness of their leftist colleagues to either accept the failure of the Soviet Union on human rights and liberalism or act accordingly. While many neocons had themselves originally failed in this regard, once it became clear that the Soviets would neither retreat from any of the territories they had occupied at the close of World War II, including all of the European capitals east of Berlin, nor nourish the liberal ideals that Marxism supposedly stood for, neoconservatives-to-be did begin to reevaluate their positions. Of his own conversion, neoconservative writer and former New Left activist David Horowitz explains: “It was what I thought was the humanity of the Marxist *idea* that made me what I was then; it is the inhumanity of what I have seen to be the Marxist *reality* that has made me what I am now,” namely, “a committed opponent of Communist rule.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed the more places Communism went and plundered, and the more indigenous Marxist resistance movements that the Soviet Union supported, the more committed to the anti-Communist cause future neoconservatives became. Referring to Soviet intentions and expansion, Horowitz continues:

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<sup>1</sup> Collier, Peter, and David Horowitz. “Another Low Dishonest Decade on the Left.” Commentary Pg 17-24.

<sup>2</sup> Horowitz, David. “Nicaragua: A Speech to My Former Comrades on the Left.” Commentary Pg 17.

“In every case and without exception, time has proved the Left wrong. And just as consistently the anti-Communists were proved right... [The Soviet Union] has not given up an inch of the empire it gained during World War II—not Eastern Europe, not the Baltic States...whose nationhood Stalin erased and which are now all but forgotten, not even the Kurile Islands which were once part of Japan. Not only have the Soviets failed to relinquish their conquests in all these years—years of dramatic, total decolonization in the West—but they have reached for more...South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Ethiopia, Yemen, Mozambique, and Angola.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course the problem for neoconservatives was not just that the Soviet Union was expansionist, but, as Horowitz hints, it was also the content of that expansion and the way Communism treated its own people. Certainly, from Stalin on forwards, there has been a clear pattern of Communist rule as brutal rule, regardless of location. “In a society we hailed as a new human dawn, 100 million people were put in slave-labor camps, in conditions rivaling Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Between 30 and 40 million people killed—in peacetime, in the daily routine of socialist rule,”<sup>2</sup> is how Horowitz describes it. And such statistics are only the beginning. The vast majority of the Communist regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were (and remain) undeniably and completely stifling of civil society, democracy, the arts, and even the free movement of people.<sup>3</sup> The refusal of so many on the left to recognize this, despite the abject lack of freedom in Russian society itself, and even after decades of Communist tragedies around the world, was perhaps the most powerful and continuous impetus for neoconservatives’ moves right. In other words, neoconservatives shifted allegiances not because they had changed their liberal goals much, but more because they had come to see the Soviet Union and even their leftist colleagues as a threat to those goals. Meanwhile the New Left, which steadily became *the* left, saw no such thing.

It is not surprising then, that neoconservatives would not describe themselves as having actually moved much to the right through any of the Cold War, at least in terms of their absolute

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<sup>1</sup> Horowitz, David. “Nicaragua: A Speech to My Former Comrades on the Left.” Commentary Pg 27.

<sup>2</sup> Horowitz, David. “Nicaragua: A Speech to My Former Comrades on the Left.” Commentary Pg 28.

<sup>3</sup> Horowitz, David. “Nicaragua: A Speech to My Former Comrades on the Left.” Commentary Pg 29.

commitment to liberalism and defending liberal values. Certainly they contend just the opposite: that it was the New Left of the 1960s and 70s, the counter-culture, anti-Vietnam War left, that, in wrapping its own utopian ‘radicalism’ in the venire of liberalism, actually stole the label liberal from its rightful owners.<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz explains: “What happened in the 1960s was, to put it simply but not inaccurately, a mass conversion to leftist radicalism by the formerly liberal intellectual establishment and a commensurate seizure of enormous power by radical ideas and attitudes over the institutions controlled by intellectuals.”<sup>2</sup> The high-jacking of very word ‘liberal’ occurred, according to Podhoretz, “when the victors in this aggression by radicals against the liberals decided not only to occupy over the territories once ruled by the defeated enemy but to assume its previously despised name as well.”<sup>3</sup> It was a decision, apparently, based in purely political considerations. The (formerly-known) radicals, who were either unsuspicious of or sympathetic towards Communism, wanted to be more than just a movement, and thus they embarked on an effort to give themselves more mainstream appeal, to become known as liberals not radicals. The 1968 campaign to have Eugene McCarthy become the Democratic nominee for president was the first such attempt, which, though unsuccessful, paved the way for George McGovern to be chosen as the Democratic nominee for president in 1972.<sup>4</sup> Both campaigns drew heavily on growing American unease with the Vietnam War, often decrying the War as unjust and not in the American interest, and, in the process, according to Podhoretz, “the term *liberal* underwent a—shall we say?—radical change of meaning and now signified on almost every issue a position almost the opposite of the one associated with liberalism a decade earlier.”<sup>5</sup> Irving Kristol refers

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “Utopianism, Ancient and Modern.” Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea. Pg 189-199. Also: Podhoretz, Norman. “Ex-Friends.” Pg 7-9.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Ex-Friends.” Pg 8.

<sup>3</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Ex-Friends.” Pg 8.

<sup>4</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Ex-Friends”. Pg 9.

<sup>5</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Ex-Friends.” Pg 9.



to the nomination of George McGovern as a message to neoconservatives: “that we were now off the liberal spectrum and that the Democratic Party no longer had room for the likes us.”<sup>1</sup>

Podhoretz echoes these sentiments when he observes: “JFK’s own ideas were now much more closely approximated by those of a conservative like Ronald Reagan, who shared his predecessor’s belief that a defense buildup was the best way to defend the liberties of the free world against the threat of Soviet totalitarianism.”<sup>2</sup> The point is clear, despite their feelings that it was the meaning of the word liberal and not their own beliefs that had changed, by the mid 1970s those now known as neoconservatives were well outside of the liberal establishment.

The situation begs the question: why were neoconservatives so unwilling to attach their names to the evolving meaning of the word liberal? The answer lies in the stark perception not only of difference between radicalism and liberalism, but of an actual fundamental opposition between the two ideologies. True liberalism is marked, in the neoconservative imagination, by an anxious patience, which, while continuously striving to bring justice to the human condition, also accepts that justice usually (historically) comes slowly. Radicalism, on the other hand, is marked just the opposite, by the demand for change and justice here and now. Whether or not neoconservatives could stomach riding alongside radicalism *intellectually*, and in most cases they could not, they absolutely could not stand its concrete implications for Communism and Cold War strategy.

That the liberalism neoconservatives embraced during the Cold War was a patient one is evidenced in the description, by Irving Kristol, of Sir Thomas More as the ideal liberal intellectual. In his 1973 essay, “Utopianism, Ancient and Modern,” Kristol writes of More: “His nobility of character consisted precisely in the fact that, even as he could imagine the world as it

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “An Autobiographical Memoir.” Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea. Pg 32.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Ex-Friends.” Pg 9.

might be, he could also live and work in the world as it was, trying to edge the latter ever so slightly toward the former, but experiencing no sour disillusionment at his ultimate lack of success.”<sup>1</sup> In a passage from *Utopia*, oft cited by neocons, More himself articulates the sort of reasoning and policies that ought to spring from his praised disposition. He writes: ““You must strive to guide policy indirectly, so that you can make the best of things, and what you can not turn to good, you can at least make less bad.””<sup>2</sup> In principle, neoconservatives have always agreed with this assessment. They would also certainly agree with the reasoning behind More’s advice: “For it is impossible to do all things well unless all men are good, and this I do not expect to see for a long time.””<sup>3</sup> Indeed it is this the belief in man’s limits, expressed so succinctly by More, that forms the heart of neoconservatism, and, further, leads to the notion of true liberalism as a prudent and patient one.

Unfortunately, according to neoconservatives, the radicals’ 1960s takeover of the liberal sphere led to a direct assault on this patience. “Unlike Sir Thomas More,” radicalism, or “utopianism,” is “quite convinced that all men are indeed good,”<sup>4</sup> and developed, Kristol explains, out of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century trends of millenarianism, rationalism and scientism. Millenarianism, which originates from the Judeo-Christian tradition, allows for a belief in the end of time or an end to history.<sup>5</sup> In a religious context it is usually linked to a final judgment, but, used in a more secular sense, it gives fuel to the notion that man could somehow break himself off from his own historical self, his shortcomings and limitations included. Rationalism, meanwhile, promotes the notion that “reality can be fully comprehended by man’s abstract

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “Utopianism, Ancient and Modern.” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 189.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” *On the Democratic Idea in America*. Pg 78.

<sup>3</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” *On the Democratic Idea in America*. Pg 78.

<sup>4</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” *On the Democratic Idea in America*. Pg 78.

<sup>5</sup> Kristol, Irving. “Utopianism, Ancient and Modern.” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 190.

reason...that existing institutions [can] be legitimized only by reason.”<sup>1</sup> The result of rationalism is, and has been since the Enlightenment, a tendency to scrutinize all existing structures and institutions for infractions against reason. The real enemy, utopianism, however, only develops when millenarianism and rationalism meet scientism. Scientism is “the notion that, because the development of technology...is progressive...human history itself can also be defined as progressive.”<sup>2</sup> In combination, these three trends lead, according to Kristol, to the radical beliefs that an imperfect human condition can become a perfected one, that this can be done institutionally, and that injustice will result if all necessary steps are not taken immediately.<sup>3</sup>

Though it could be argued that liberalism itself developed out of a similar set of ideas, and really it did, the issue for neoconservatives is that without liberalism’s fundamental skepticism of man, the conclusions to be drawn from the combination of millenarianism, rationalism and scientism become entirely different. That difference can be summarized the following way: In true (neoconservative) liberalism there is always space for progress, but progress is not guaranteed, man can actually backslide if he pushes too hard, so a degree of patience is prudent. In utopianism or radicalism, an infinite space for progress is supposed, but this space can only be guaranteed through an unrelenting reassessment of existing institutions, as well as a willingness to continuously tear those down and create new ones. During the Cold War the result was, on the one hand, a patient (neoconservative) liberalism, which, while recognizing America’s flaws, also recognized that America represented something relatively much better than Communism. And, on the other hand, a radical liberalism, which, unable to get passed America’s many deep flaws, either actively or even unconsciously sympathized with the

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “Utopianism, Ancient and Modern.” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 191.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. “Utopianism, Ancient and Modern.” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 191-

<sup>3</sup> Kristol, Irving. “Utopianism, Ancient and Modern.” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 192.

Communist attempt to create something new. Being from the former camp, Podhoretz, his disgust palpable, describes utopianism as:

a climate of opinion that finds the idea of a *gradual* evolution of traditional societies thoroughly uninteresting—which, indeed, has an instinctive detestation of all traditional societies as being inherently unjust, and an equally instinctive approval, as being inherently righteous, of any revolutionary ideology which claim's to incorporate the people's will.<sup>1</sup>

The inability of the two liberalisms to coexist peacefully then, despite the fundamental liberal core of each, is really no surprise. Further, given that neoconservatives saw radicalism as high-jacking the very meaning of the word 'liberal' in the 1960s, their intellectual inability to evolve in step with the New Left's liberalism should be easily understood.

Neoconservatives did not, however, reject the New Left liberalism from a strictly ideological intellectual perspective. Their *manifested* unwillingness to go along with the New Left arose instead from a concrete fear that the New Left was blind to the dangers of the real world and thus was not equipped to defend the liberal values both sides cherished. In his book, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Irving Kristol describes neoconservatism as: “the erosion of liberal faith among a relatively small...group of scholars and intellectuals, and the movement of this group toward a more conservative point of view...disbelieving of the liberal metaphysics”<sup>2</sup> It is a passage which gets to the core of neoconservative fears. As Kristol hints, neoconservatives feel, to this day, that the liberalism promulgated by the New Left since the 1960s is overwhelmingly a liberal “faith,” that is, an unfounded faith in the inevitable triumph of liberalism. What the faith allows for, and inevitably leads to, is a dereliction of duty—a measurable lack of preparedness for facing the evils of the world. “Metapolitically, it is essentially a religious phenomenon...subpolitically, it is an expression of the modern

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” *On the Democratic Idea in America*. Pg 79.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg x.

technological mentality,”<sup>1</sup> writes Kristol. Though they admittedly once shared the faith, neoconservatives have since come to see it as naïve and ill-equipped, especially in a world so recently and painfully touched by Hitler, Stalin, and all the rest. What the world needs instead, according to neoconservatives, is a concrete and capable guarantor of liberal values, one with both the moral and military means to deal with the real threats to liberalism. For neoconservatives, America is that guarantor. For the left, at least as it has existed since the 1960s, there is no guarantor, for none is necessary. It is this *manifested* disagreement, over defending liberalism, which leads to the final divorce between the two sides; the former calls the latter’s stance an inability to face “the harsh and nasty imperatives of imperial power,”<sup>2</sup> and, as a result, turns its back on the left altogether.

\*\*\* Interlude \*\*\*

Before going any further it is worth reflecting on what was just described. Whether or not we accept the neoconservative description of the events of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, how do we feel about the concept that a liberal faith is not equipped to defend liberal values? Is there any truth to it? Answering such questions, I think, requires a look at the content of our so-called liberal faith. What sorts of policy ideas do we bring to the table in a discussion of the appropriate responses to actual aggression by the forces of evil? After all, this is the question that neoconservatives are asking us.

Using my imagination, the first objection I can hear from the left is that any question centering on the ‘forces of evil’ is patently absurd, for such labels are overly simplistic, painting, as they do, the world in counterproductive and black and white terms. Of course, such objections are themselves patently absurd. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish conquest in Central America

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “The American Revolution.” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 246.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” *On the Democratic Idea in America*. Pg 83.

resulted in the deaths of more than 90 percent of a native population of roughly 22 million.<sup>1</sup> In the 1940s, a single man came frighteningly close to wiping the Jews off the face of the planet altogether. Even as we speak, the liberal community is in an uproar over the genocide occurring in Sudan. These are all examples of the forces of evil alive and well.

Moving passed the immature rejection of unpleasant realities then (certainly a minority reaction among those on the left anyways), what other responses to evil can the left be said to offer? Well, plenty. International law, international criminal courts, the UN, negotiations, stipends for good behavior, funding for civil society and opposition groups, development aid, even sanctions, and, if need be, war. Undoubtedly the left has shown a clear desire to use many of these tools more actively than is currently being done, and, additionally, has even shown a willingness to use the more destructive among the list when absolutely necessary. I think it is also undeniable, however, that the liberals of today, myself included, have developed weak stomachs when it comes to the dropping of any bombs, much less the planting of actual American soldiers. Indeed liberals often recoil from the use of force without even really taking the time to grasp who or what the target might be. Luckily, more often than not, weak stomachs and gut feelings turn out to be adequate. Sometimes, however, they are not. Sometimes respected world leaders like British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain return from Munich, having just signed supposed peace treaties and declaring ““peace for our time,””<sup>2</sup> only to have every great European capital lay around them in ruins six years later. These are the mistakes humans make and the evils humans do. Thus, whether or not one swallows the neoconservative accusation of a liberal faith at odds with liberal values in its entirety, it is still critical that we on the left be reminded of our possession of an outlook which, I believe, too often *does* amount to a faith. If

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<sup>1</sup> Emerging Infectious Diseases. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Website. “Megadrought and Megadeath in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Mexico.” <http://www.cdc.gov/NCIDOD/EID/vol8no4/01-0175.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Kagan, Donald and Frederick W. Kagan. “Peace for Our Time?” Commentary. Pg. 42.

we take nothing else from the neoconservative message, we should at least reflect, as neoconservatives have, on the *reality* of liberalism's mortality. Either that, or have our own back up plan.

\*\*\* America: The Neoconservative Plan and Backup Plan \*\*\*

Now that the neoconservatives have completed their split with the left it is possible to flesh out a more complete picture of the thought's fundamental tenants and assumptions. Of these there are three: Evil exists. America is relatively good. America must *act* to confront evil.

The neoconservative belief in the presence of evil among men comes not from any understanding of man as being fundamentally evil, but from a conception of man as inherently possessing the *potential* for evil. This potential originates, as has been mentioned already, in man's inescapable limitation, the neoconservative acceptance of which is evident throughout their thought. Kristol, a Jew, writes: "What impressed me most about the Christian theologians was their certainty, derived from the Bible, that the human condition placed inherent limitations on human possibility. Original Sin was one way of saying this."<sup>1</sup> Another way of arguing the same, is to say that evil enters the picture because man is simultaneously powerful and imperfect. Indeed neoconservatives stress this dangerous mixture continuously, feeling that the potential for evil is too often ignored by its own purveyor, man himself. They give this condition the ignoble title of "exaggerated hopes,"<sup>2</sup> or hopes which "[assume], on the basis of various benign theories about human nature and human history, that the actions of self-serving men will coalesce into a common good."<sup>3</sup> It is a condition, most importantly, that neoconservatives patently reject, preferring, as they do, to warn that "optimism...could be our undoing."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. "An Autobiographical Memoir." Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea. Pg 5.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. On the Democratic Idea in America. Pg ix.

<sup>3</sup> Kristol, Irving. On the Democratic Idea in America. Pg vii-viii.

<sup>4</sup> Glynn, Patrick. "The Dangers Beyond Containment." Commentary. Pg 22.

In fact, in the neoconservative mind, optimism regarding the rise of evil already has been our undoing on a number of occasions. Patrick Glynn, prominent neoconservative and currently Associate Director at the George Washington University Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies, explains:

Since the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western societies have recurrently passed through periods when they imagined that the problems of international politics had either been solved or were imminently on their way to solution...a belief in the ascendancy of economic forced over political and military ones; a belief in the obsolescence of major war...rendering the more sobering lessons of history, even very recent history, irrelevant.<sup>1</sup>

What were these periods? Glynn goes on:

The first period, extending from 1906 to 1914, culminated in “Norman Angellism,” a European-wide political movement on the eve of World War I, animated by the faith that major war had become cost-ineffective and hence irrational...The second period...ran for nearly 20 years, between 1919 and 1938, peaking in 1928 when the major nations—including the future belligerents of World War II—signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact, forswearing forever the use of war as an “instrument of national policy.” The third bout of euphoria...a matter of mere months in 1945...was cut short by Soviet moves on Iran, Poland and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

According to neoconservatives, there are critical lessons to be learned here. For one, the world should ask itself how it repeatedly and so wholeheartedly predicted peace but in the end received only war? Neocons have their own answer: “Each of these periods...has contained within it the seeds of its own destruction...influenced by their optimism...Western governments pursued unguarded policies, destined to make the world a more dangerous place,”<sup>3</sup> contends Glynn. Viewing history through this lens, neoconservatives push not for optimism after victory, but for pessimism. True to their word, neoconservatives have indeed pushed, since the 1950s, for the acceptance of stance of permanent guardedness (by America) against evil.

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<sup>1</sup> Glynn, Patrick. “The Dangers Beyond Containment.” Commentary. Pg 15.

<sup>2</sup> Glynn, Patrick. “The Dangers Beyond Containment.” Commentary. Pg 15.

<sup>3</sup> Glynn, Patrick. “The Dangers Beyond Containment.” Commentary. Pg 15.



That such a stance is necessary is plain, according to neocons, thanks to the mere existence of the Soviet Union and Communism (up until 1991 of course). Podhoretz makes the comparison of the USSR to Nazi Germany: “The Soviet Union is not a nation like any other. It is a revolutionary state, exactly as Hitler’s Germany was...it wishes to create a new international order in which it would be the dominant power...In such an order there would be no more room for any of the freedoms or prosperity we now enjoy.”<sup>1</sup> Appropriately, neoconservatives were baffled that many on the left did not see the threat, which was undoubtedly very real. How real? Podhoretz says it best:

Communism, whether dominated by Moscow or not, has been a curse. To this day there is not a single Communist country in the world in which even the mildest criticism of government...is permitted. Nor can novelists and poets write or composers compose or painters paint as they wish. In the Soviet Union...some *sixty million* persons were “secretly done to death by exhaustion, frozen to death in uninhabited wastes, and decimated by famine,”—people whose only crime, that is, was opposition or even suspected opposition to the regime...Not only, then, do they destroy liberty and human culture wherever their writ extends...the Communists do not even make good on their promise to improve the material lot of the people. No wonder it is mordantly said in East Europe that under Soviet domination, the Sahara would experience a shortage of sand.<sup>2</sup>

Though it may seem as though Podhoretz simply has an overly-developed flair for the dramatic, really he is telling the truth. If liberal values are the measure, the men who ran the Soviet Union unquestionably ran an evil empire.

It should be noted: none of this criticism is meant to imply that the Soviet Union necessarily started out on the side of evil. Most neoconservatives would actually argue quite the opposite, that the Marxist ideals of the Soviet Union were originally quite noble. But this is just the point. What makes evil so frightening, from a neoconservative perspective, is that it can infect ideals, regimes, and men that started out nobly. Horowitz lets Milan Kundera, the

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 91-92.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 92-93.

acclaimed Czechoslovakian writer and strong opponent of Communism, articulate this phenomenon: “‘People like to say that revolution is beautiful; it is only the terror arising from it which is evil. But this is not true. The evil is already present in the beautiful; hell is already contained in the dream of paradise...To condemn Gulags is easy, but to reject the poetry which leads to the Gulag by way of paradise is as difficult as ever.’”<sup>1</sup> Although Kundera is here describing the dual nature of revolutions, he could just as easily be describing the dual, limited nature of man. Certainly this is what the neoconservative would see in Kundera’s words; that evil exists within everything man touches, including himself.

The good news is that America does exist and is relatively good. Although neoconservatives did not always embrace this notion themselves, once they glimpsed America and its capitalism alongside the Soviet Union and its Communism, that America is relatively good became more or less self-evident. One example: while America certainly was, in the 1960s, waging a war with itself over blacks’ rights and Vietnam, a war in which voices for change were often violently silenced, America never had a state policy involving mass executions, as both Nazi Germany and the USSR did. Indeed, the very fact of America’s capability to wage a war against itself, and eventually socially and legally settle that war, testifies to the relative goodness of America. The Soviet Union, certainly, was not able to wage any sort of internal social or political wars—if it had been capable, art and dissent would have been tolerated, but they were not. Ultimately, it is this sort of self-evident relative goodness, the kind which “[finds] expression in Macaulay’s tart rejoinder to Francis Bacon: ‘An acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia,’”<sup>2</sup> that the neoconservatives give America credit for. America is not perfect, but it allows ample space for improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> Horowitz, David. “Nicaragua: A Speech to My Former Comrades on the Left.” *Commentary*. Pg 29-30.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. “Utopianism, Ancient and Modern” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 199.

Beyond self-evidence, the main reason for America's goodness is historical. In the neoconservative mind, America, though admittedly plagued with tremendous ills, has an impressively moderate history. While 'manifest destiny' once told Americans that they could push ever further West, often at the expense of all others, the American tradition is not one which they would generally describe as seeking of world domination. When superpower status was thrust in the American direction in the wake of World War II, a war begun because of someone else's desire for world domination, the American people, according to Kristol, could only muster "resigned acceptance of great-power responsibilities."<sup>1</sup> Even more telling are the actions that America took after accepting the role of superpower. In 1945, just after winning the fight against Nazism, America oversaw the founding of the United Nations, an organization dedicated to giving every country a seat at the table and resolving international crises of every size and color peacefully.<sup>2</sup> In 1947, America unilaterally created and supported the Marshall Plan, "possibly the most generous program of economic aid the world has ever seen,"<sup>3</sup> offering to rebuild every single country in Europe, while simultaneously pushing each one towards independence and self-sufficiency. These are not small undertakings. They each require a considerate moderation, as well as consistent adherence to their fundamentally *progressive* liberal roots and inspirations. That America managed such undertakings, against a contentious and historically unprecedented backdrop of potential total world domination, should indeed be taken as testament to America's relative goodness. Neoconservatives should not be the only ones to recognize this.

Why though, the imperative for America to *act*? Neoconservatives argue that America must act against evil for spiritual reasons, self-interested reasons, and finally moral reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. "American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy." On the Democratic Idea in America. Pg 82.

<sup>2</sup> History of the United Nations. United Nations Website. <http://www.un.org/aboutun/unhistory/>

<sup>3</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. "The Present Danger." Pg 23.

Before discussing these, however, a brief definition of *action* is necessary. Certainly action should not be taken to mean a constant military offensive. It should instead conjure a vision of constant vigilance, backed up by a real willingness to go on the offensive if necessary. As mentioned, the reasoning behind this stance involves spiritual, self-interested, and moral components.

For neoconservatives, America has an undeniable spiritual quality and purpose, both among its own citizens and in the world more broadly. America and its democracy give man an ideal to believe in and aspire towards. These characteristics, however, do not and cannot exist purely passively, as if by sitting example. Describing the requirement of spiritual maintenance by purposeful animation, Podhoretz writes: “The founding fathers, then, established what they thought to be—and what the world then unanimously thought to be—a democratic process for the American people. But they looked beyond this democratic process to the spirit—the ideal intent—that might animate it.”<sup>1</sup> This looking *beyond* in search of an ideal intent is the crux for neocons; it is what America must do to remain spiritually inspiring. In the words of 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet Matthew Arnold, Podhoretz goes on: “‘Nations are not truly great solely because the individuals composing them are numerous, free, and active; but they are great when these numbers, this freedom, and this activity are employed in the service on an ideal higher than that of an ordinary man, taken by himself.’”<sup>2</sup> Neoconservatives, then, clearly see acting against evil as an appropriate, even inherently American way of going *beyond* and servicing the higher ideals. Moreover, they argue that doing so will allow America to live on not just physically, but also spiritually, itself an absolute necessity because:

It is crucial to the lives of all our citizens, as it is to all human beings at all times, that they encounter a world that possesses a transcendent meaning, a world in

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Historians and the Democratic Idea.” *On the Democratic Idea in America*. Pg. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Historians and the Democratic Idea.” *On the Democratic Idea in America*. Pg. 54.

which the human experience makes sense. Nothing is more dehumanizing, more certain to generate crisis, than to experience one's life as a meaningless event in a meaningless world.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, modern man needs for his own well being for America to retain its spiritual quality—for America to remain active in the service of its liberal ideals and in the face of evil. This is the first reason America must act.

America should also act (early and quickly), according to neocons, for the sake of its own material well-being. History, especially early 20<sup>th</sup> century history, has born this out. It has shown that no matter what how thoroughly the forces of evil are placated, conflict with those forces is will eventually become inevitable. The reasons for the catch-22 are twofold. First, evil is by definition not able to be placated indefinitely, at a certain point it must flex its muscle. Second, those over which evil attempts to flex its muscle will invariably resist, especially if they feel they have the means. Donald Kagan, neoconservative and professor of History at Yale, articulates this phenomenon best: “The free and spirited will not allow the world order to be torn up to its disadvantage and their security endangered, and they will reject any leadership prepared to do so. The only choice available to leaders of such nations is whether to act with realism while there is time or avoid the hard decisions and wait for a crisis.”<sup>2</sup> That America should act early and swiftly is not just abstractly justifiable, of course, it can also be done by example.

Neoconservatives offer the lead up to both World War I and II to this end. Kagan claims that World War II revealed the following:

The world had suffered a terrible war needlessly. The irresolution, timidity, division, and lack of resolve of the democracies had allowed aggressive and evil regimes in Italy, Japan, and especially Germany to grow so powerful as to threaten the freedom of the rest of the world. It had required a horrible and bloody war to put them down, whereas a determined collective effort could have deterred

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “The Cultural Revolution and the Capitalist Future.” Neoconservatism: The Autobiography on an Idea. Pg 134.

<sup>2</sup> Kagan, Donald. “World War I, World War II, World War III.” Commentary. Pg. 35.

the aggressors or, at any rate, have defeated them quickly...had the democracies acted firmly soon enough.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently Hitler himself verified this claim, admitting:

The forty-eight hours after the march into the Rhineland were the most nerve-racking of my life. If the French had then marched into the Rhineland we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs, for the military resources at our disposal would have been wholly inadequate for even a moderate resistance.<sup>2</sup>

The lesson to be learned here, according to Kagan, is that an active “offensive element” is necessary for the preservation of body and peace in the face of evil. He writes: “Had the French and British between the wars examined their political and strategic situation objectively and realistically they would have seen that an offensive element was essential to their very defensive goals for maintaining peace and the security of the new Europe.”<sup>3</sup> These were the lessons of “Munich,”<sup>4</sup> and this is the second reason America must be proactive with evil.

The final reason is moral. The history of the 20 century, in which the all the major European powers more or less destroyed themselves, created an international landscape in which, Kristol argues: “there is no way the United States, as the world’s mightiest power, can avoid an imperial role...The United States is not going to cease being an imperial power...It is the world situation.”<sup>5</sup> The result, given that “power begets responsibility—above all, the responsibility to use power responsibly,”<sup>6</sup> is an environment in which America has absolutely no choice but to make and act on decisions which often amount to “terrible burdens.”<sup>7</sup> Kristol explains:

There are a great many people who appear to think that a great power is only a magnification of a small power, and the principles governing the actions of the latter are simply transferable...In fact, there is a qualitative difference...a great power is “imperial” because what it does *not* do is just as significant, and just as

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<sup>1</sup> Kagan, Donald. “World War I, World War II, World War III.” Commentary. Pg. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Kagan, Donald. “World War I, World War II, World War III.” Commentary. Pg. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Kagan, Donald. “World War I, World War II, World War III.” Commentary. Pg. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Kagan, Donald. “World War I, World War II, World War III.” Commentary. Pg. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” On the Democratic Idea in America. Pg 83-88.

<sup>6</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” On the Democratic Idea in America. Pg 88.

<sup>7</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” On the Democratic Idea in America. Pg 88.

consequential, as what it does. Which is to say, a great power does not have the range of freedom of action—derived from freedom of inaction—that a small power possesses. It is entangled in a web of responsibilities from which there is no escape.<sup>1</sup>

The sense of a moral duty, or at least of an inability to escape from moral duty, is clear. The neoconservative feeling is that America has no choice but action, inaction is also an action, and the latter is the inevitably immoral one.

\*\*\* Interlude \*\*\*

Though I am not sure that it marks a disagreement with my friends on the left, as the neocons certainly do, I do find quite compelling the notion that evil's existence and America's relative goodness meet in the imperative for American action. For one, both the existence of evil forces and America's relative goodness seem undeniable; I would encourage anyone with doubts to take a harder look. As for American action, though I am not at all comfortable with the idea that America must act in order to help men meet with transcendent meaning, finding it wholly over-dramatic if not downright fanatical, I do agree that American action has the potential to prevent much greater catastrophes and wars down the line, as well as that America has a moral responsibility not to be passive.

My problem with the discussion thus far, however, is that it remains mostly in the realm of the abstract. We have yet to see the matrix of neoconservative theory in action. Given that Kristol once wrote, "It makes no sense to say that a political idea turned out badly because human beings mishandled it, or because circumstances conspired against it. If that idea could not withstand human mishandling or unforeseen circumstance, it was a political fantasy rather than a realistic political idea,"<sup>2</sup> it is only right that we should examine how neoconservatism turned

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. "American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy." *On the Democratic Idea in America*. Pg 79.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. "The Cultural Revolution and the Capitalist Future." *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 123.

out in practice. To do so, we will turn first to the Cold War, where neoconservative theory was originally implemented, and then to the 1990s and the War on Terror, where it underwent critical changes.

### \*\*\* The Cold War and Containment \*\*\*

The period called the cold war began in 1947 when the United States, after several years of acquiescence in the expansion of the Soviet empire, decided to resist any further advance, whether in the form of military invasion by Soviet troops or political subversion by local Communist parties...In March 1947, announcing a special program of aid to Greece and Turkey, President Truman, in the doctrine soon to bear his name, declared that “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure.”<sup>1</sup>

For neoconservatives, this is exactly how the Cold War started, as a result of defense moves made by the United States against Soviet aggression. Though not everyone would agree, including the Soviets, who described “this strategy of resistance, of holding the line against their own imperialistic ambition...as a declaration of war by ‘the United States and...the imperialistic military blocs,’”<sup>2</sup> it is safe to conclude that it is the neoconservatives who are more correct in their portrayal. Unfortunately for the neocons, at the start of the Cold War they were not yet a coherent group with a specifically articulated set of ideas. Though they were ever-adamant about the danger of Soviet ambitions, they were not yet in a position to guide Cold War policy, as they would be starting in the mid 1970s, with the foundation of the American Enterprise Institute, and continuing into the 1980s, with the election of Ronald Reagan. Up through the 1960s, commentary and urgings were all the neoconservatives could offer. Looking at these comments does, however, provide a solid sense of the general strategic approach of the neocons during the Cold War, that is, of the strategy of containment.

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 13.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 14.



Containment was an approach which fell squarely in the center of the political spectrum, at least in terms of the range of strategies that were being proposed from both the American left and right to combat the Soviet Union. “On the Left, the argument was that the Soviet Union...was pursuing a defensive rather than aggressive strategy, and that Stalin wanted only security and peace,” and thus it “advocated disarmament and ‘understanding.’”<sup>1</sup> On the Right, the argument was that the US ought to utilize its military and economic superiority while it had the chance, and thus it “demanded ‘rollback’ and liberation.”<sup>2</sup> Containment, meanwhile, while consistently confrontational, refusing to give another inch to the Soviet Union if possible, was also patient, possessing a view to both short and long term stability. What it required, and moreover what it was, was the belief that:

‘The main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies...by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographic and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy, but which cannot be charmed or talked out of existence.’<sup>3</sup>

The fact that containment would *correspond* to “the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy” is particularly telling. What this means is that it was not a policy devised as a way for America to design its own offensive initiatives against the Soviet Union, but instead as an active reactive and defensive strategy. Most importantly, the tone neoconservatives like Podhoretz take towards containment is almost universally supportive.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, during the Cold War, neoconservatives rarely rushed to confront the Soviet Union directly. In their attempts to defend liberal values they were still wholeheartedly guided by the words of Sir Thomas More: “‘You must strive to guide

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 19.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 19.

<sup>3</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 18.

<sup>4</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Also: Podhoretz, Norman. “Why We Were in Vietnam.” Also: Glynn, Patrick. “The Dangers Beyond Containment.” Commentary Also: Kagan, Donald. “World War I, World War II, World War III.” Commentary.

policy indirectly, so that you can make the best of things, and what you can not turn good, you can at least make less bad.”<sup>1</sup>

Part of the reason for the neoconservative rejection of more rightwing policies of “rollback” was their understanding that liberation, in order for it to be truly successful, would require more than just American military intervention. It would require rebuilding efforts. Further, in any rebuilding process, especially in the Cold War context, America could not simply allow whatever form of government so happened to, to come into being; it would have to make at least an attempt at strengthening democratic institutions. Neoconservatives, though, found the idea that America should go around using its muscle to build democracies, often in places where there was very little historical basis for democratic institutions, to be mostly naïve. Of the idea that democracy is “the best form of government for all people, in all places, at all times,” Kristol chides: “No man who has ever studied political philosophy, and seriously contemplated the problems of governing men [would] ever [say] such a thing; certainly none among the founding fathers ever did.”<sup>2</sup> As such, most neoconservatives held “rollback” to have more in common with the previously described “utopian” ideals of the New Left than they did with any sort of realistic Cold War strategy. Kristol, clearly disturbed by his own observation, writes: “There are precious few people in the United States who will say aloud that revolutionary intentions are inconsistent with a prudent and responsible foreign policy of a great power.”<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, “rollback” constituted such an intention, and, as a result, the majority of neoconservatives consistently supported containment instead.

None of this should give the impression, hopefully, that containment was somehow a soft strategy. In practice, “the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” On the Democratic Idea in America. Pg 78.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Historians and the Democratic Idea.” On the Democratic Idea in America. Pg 56.

<sup>3</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” On the Democratic Idea in America. Pg 75.

constantly shifting geographic and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy,”<sup>1</sup> required a ready American willingness to build weapons, threaten force, and send soldiers to die. During the Cold War, in the words of Donald Kagan, America and the Western democracies would have to understand that:

Military preparations at a high cost will be required for success. They must achieve and maintain a credible array of nuclear weapons and defensive systems to deter Soviet adventurism, even though technological change will continue to make those weapons obsolete and require new ones. They must support armies, navies, and air forces adequate to make conventional war unattractive. On occasion they must resist Soviet-supported rebellions that threaten important interests and be willing to use their own armies when needed for the purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, neoconservatives supported (at least in theory) both of the Cold War conflicts in which American troops were deployed en masse, Korea and then Vietnam, and also every single other American attempt to undermine Soviet-supported Marxist revolutionaries in the third world, whether by aid and weapons or by other means.

Looking at Korea and Vietnam, it is clear that neoconservatives saw the two as essentially identical conflicts, at least in terms of the way each fit into the policy of containment. What is interesting is that this opinion did not necessarily lead neoconservatives to support the application of containment to both conflicts equally. To the contrary, neocons recognized that certain factors, such as the gravity of a potential defeat, might preclude certain actions, requiring an application of containment to one conflict but not the other.

In Korea: On June 25, 1950, after months of tension between the two governments, the troops of the Chinese and Soviet-backed, communist North Korean Army crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and invaded the non-communist South. <sup>3</sup> ““This was,”” President Truman wrote, ““the same kind of challenge Hitler flaunted in the face of the rest of the world when he crossed the

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 18.

<sup>2</sup> Kagan, Donald. “World War I, World War II, World War III.” Commentary. Pg 40.

<sup>3</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Why We Were In Vietnam.” Pg 23.

borders of Austria and Czechoslovakia,”<sup>1</sup> and, not wanting to see the same mistake made twice, Truman declared war against the North Koreans. Being an adherent to the policy of containment as he was, however, Truman never considered that the purpose of the war was to liberate the North from Communism. His intent from the start was: “to push the North Koreans back behind the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.”<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz asks and answers: “Was the policy to be containment or was it to be liberation?...Truman’s answer to this question left no room for ambiguity... ‘I wanted it clearly understood that our operations in Korea were designed to restore peace there and to restore the border... To have extended the fight to mainland Asia would have been the wrong war, at the wrong time, and in the wrong place’”<sup>3</sup> In fact, it *was* with the restoration of the border in 1953 that a peace agreement was finally reached—but not before casualties on all sides had climbed into the hundreds of thousands. This was the type of containment policy that the neoconservatives unfalteringly backed, for it combined a willingness to fight with patience and an acceptance of still-good but not ideal outcomes.

In Vietnam: The chain of events leading up to the war in Vietnam was undoubtedly very similar to that which preceded the Korean War. Podhoretz argues: “It followed upon the precedent of Korea in the sense that Vietnam, too, was a country partitioned into Communist and non-Communist areas and where the Communists were trying to take-over the non-Communists by force...that...Vietnam...represented no less clear a challenge to containment than Korea.”<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, even though Podhoretz acknowledges these parallels, and despite his general reverence for the policy of containment, he ultimately admits that the decision to fight the Vietnam War was imprudent. He concludes:

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Why We Were In Vietnam.” Pg 23.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Why We Were In Vietnam.” Pg 28.

<sup>3</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Why We Were In Vietnam.” Pg 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 27.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the only way the United States could have avoided defeat in Vietnam was by staying out of the war altogether. Kennedy, facing as Eisenhower had before him the possibility of complete collapse in Vietnam, would have had to follow Eisenhower's example and do nothing. To have made that decision would not have implied that his repeated assertions of the importance of preventing a takeover of South Vietnam by the Communists had been insincere or unserious. As we have seen, no such inference could legitimately have been drawn from Eisenhower's decision in 1954. Eisenhower *had* been serious, but he had also concluded that the possibilities of success were so small and the risks of failure too high. His decision to stay out had been a prudential decision against getting involved in "the wrong war at the wrong time in the wrong place."...[Kennedy] did not. And so, failing to take measure of the local obstacles both political and military, refusing to face up squarely to the dimensions of the commitment that would inevitably be required, and ignoring "the reasonable limits of its capabilities," the United States under Kennedy...went to war in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

What emerges here is an even more nuanced picture of neoconservative thought. Though some neoconservatives might disagree with Podhoretz's assessment, it is clear that during the Cold War, despite their wholehearted embrace of the policy of containment, neoconservatives like Podhoretz did recognize the limits of American power. They understood that America could only do so much, that not every single source of friction had to be confronted, and that it was not always best to push too hard. This made them at once patient and non-ideological. It made them, by their own definition, good liberals.

\*\*\* Interlude \*\*\*

At the end of the Vietnam War, obviously, the Cold War was far from over. It would be superfluous to go into neoconservative ideas about the remainder of the Cold War in detail, however, because those ideas did not evolve much after Vietnam. Post Vietnam, neocons wanted nothing more than to see a continuation of the use of containment, despite its recent misapplication. What they got instead, as a result of the domestic American political climate of the 1970s, was Nixon's strategy of "détente." Détente, according to which American troops

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. "Why We Were In Vietnam." Pg 62-63.

would no longer be deployed directly and “any Soviet-sponsored aggression would be handled by American surrogates within the affected region,”<sup>1</sup> was a resounding disappointment for neoconservatives. Refusing to call it by its given name, they labeled it “strategic retreat.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed even when the policies of Ronald Reagan, which were much more proactive than either Nixon’s or Carter’s, were substituted for détente in the 1980s, the neoconservatives were fully conscious that such policies did not constitute a real return to the containment strategy they so admired. As such, in the post-Vietnam period, neoconservatives were resigned to exchanging a broader policy, containment, for a collection of strong individual measures. From the 1970s and on through the 80s, then, they lobbied for increases in the development of new tactical weapons and defenses, including the Strategic Defense Initiative or “Star Wars,” and against arms control agreements, such as SALT I and SALT II.<sup>3</sup> They also supported Reagan on Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and in other similar conflicts where the administration was attempting to arm counter-Marxist or anti-Soviet insurgencies. As I was saying, however, none of these policies merit in depth discussion in this particular paper, because they reveal little of relevance that hasn’t already been established about Cold War neocon thought: First, that neoconservatives found containment, a strategy which was specifically *non-offensive* but which did require a willingness to use American troops *responsively*, to be the ideal method for dealing with evils like the Soviet Union. And second, that even within the policy of containment, neoconservatives recognized the limits of American power, the ability of the Soviet Union to create potentially insurmountable problems for the United States in open conflict, and thus the importance of choosing direct confrontations wisely. Certainly, these are the two most important lessons to take away from the Cold War as it relates to the original neocon mindset.

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign-Policy Debates.” Commentary. Pg 21.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 32.

<sup>3</sup> Codevilla, Angelo. “How SDI is Being Undone From Within.” Commentary. Pg 21.

Also important to realize, of course, are the motivations behind the mindset. Though some on the left may disagree (wrongly in my opinion), my belief is that through most of the Cold War, whatever their title, the neocons remained good liberals in that they were committed to defending liberal values. I share the sentiments of John Updike, who plainly reminds us: “The original commitment in Vietnam was made by President Truman, a mainstream liberal. It was seconded by President Eisenhower, a moderate liberal. It was intensified by the late President Kennedy, a flaming liberal...They are not moral monsters. They are all honorable men. They are all liberals.”<sup>1</sup> This is not to say I stand with the neoconservatives in tactical agreement on every Cold War initiative they backed (Nicaragua). It is more that I sympathize with the worldview they articulated and the goals they aspired towards. Certainly there is no doubt in my mind that the Soviet Union and its Communism were the enemies of liberalism and humanity to the same extent that Hitler and his national-socialism were. Nor do I think, on the whole, that the left disagrees. Still, I sense in many of my liberal friends an unwarranted suspicion of those who were unqualified in their rejection of the USSR, especially of neoconservatives. What I think would be more productive, particularly in giving the left reasonable ground to stand when it does rightly decry more recent neoconservative machinations, is an acknowledgement of the decency, consistency, and appropriateness with which most neoconservatives approached the Cold War—an acknowledgement that they too were then still liberals with a lot to teach the rest of us.

\*\*\* The 1990s \*\*\*

Almost no observers saw the collapse of the Soviet Union coming as quickly and unexpectedly as it did in 1991. The neoconservatives are no exception. As a result, when the fateful moment did arrive, neither the neocons nor anyone else was immediately prepared to articulate or predict the future of American foreign policy. As Podhoretz describes it:

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<sup>1</sup> Updike, John. “On Not Being a Dove.” Commentary. Pg 25.

“With the Cold War over, *everyone* seemed at sea where foreign policy was concerned. Against whom were we now supposed to be defending ourselves, or maintaining our military strength to deter, or, if all else failed, to fight?...There was nothing remotely approaching the shaky and unstable agreement over the Soviet threat that had guided American foreign policy since the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine in 1947.”<sup>1</sup>

Even within the neoconservative camp, cracks over disagreements in the appropriate path for America in the new era began to appear. Some, such as neoconservative political economist Francis Fukuyama, argued that America should no longer have to use primarily military might to deter and confront new threats, at least not as often as during the Cold War. He writes: “Today, internationalism and engagement are more properly matters of how the U.S. and the international financial institutions can help Russia or China or Ukraine build free markets and democracy, rather than the conditions under which the U.S. will or will not use military force.”<sup>2</sup> Others, including William Kristol (son of Irving), Norman Podhoretz, Donald and Frederick Kagan, Richard Perle, Elliot Abrams, and Michael Ledeen, disagreed.<sup>3</sup> These men, who found “no good ground for abandoning the hard line they took during the cold war,” began to embrace what they describe as a “neo-Reaganite foreign policy.”<sup>4</sup> Though neither side of the debate would completely win out until the election of President George W. Bush in 2000, at which point the neo-Reaganites won resoundingly, by the mid 1990s it was clear that the latter group was the larger and would have the ear of the Republican Party for the foreseeable future.

Neo-Reaganite policy has two distinct components. The first is military; America can and should build upon its clear advantages in arms while it has the opportunity.<sup>5</sup> It is a stance informed most heavily by the neoconservative narrative of World War I, in which Britain

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign Policy Debates.” Commentary. Pg 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. “American Power—For What? A Symposium.” Commentary. Pg 26.

<sup>3</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign Policy Debates.” Commentary. Pg 29.

<sup>4</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign Policy Debates.” Commentary. Pg 29.

<sup>5</sup> Kristol, William. “American Power—For What? A Symposium.” Commentary. Pg 36. Also: Podhoretz, Norman. “Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign Policy Debates.” Commentary. Pg 29.



enabled Nazi Germany's rise by neglecting to adequately maintain its armed forces. Donald Kagan and his son Frederick Kagan, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, are clear about the narrative's influence:

In 1919, having just played a decisive role in winning the most devastating war yet fought, Great Britain stood at the height of its military power...Britain's leaders reckoned that no major conflict lay on the horizon for at least 10 years. They were right about that. And yet, by the summer of 1940, a mere *twenty* years later, the situation had become completely reversed...Germany had arisen in arms once more...and was poised to strike England itself. In 1991, the United States was in a position comparable to that of England in 1919.<sup>1</sup>

The second component of neo-Reaganite policy is political; America can and should spread democracy.<sup>2</sup> Michael Ledeen writes: "The only truly realistic American foreign policy is an ideological one that seeks to advance the democratic revolution wherever and whenever possible."<sup>3</sup> Though neoconservatives claim both aims are consistent continuations of their Cold War ideas, and in some ways they are, in the 1990s it also became clear that a considerable and contradictory shift was occurring within the neocon approach to each. While neoconservatives remained motivated by their belief that the limited nature of man would make the rise of new evils inevitable, hence the continued emphasis on military maintenance, they also began to neglect the flipside of that very same notion—the side which had once led them to understand the inherent limits of American power and the subsequent need for patience in world affairs.

Before going into these new shifts in detail, however, a brief summary of the neoconservative strategy of old is necessary. Previously, neoconservatives had advocated a policy in which America would maintain a strong military and a willingness to fight for the sole purpose of acting decisively *defensively*. That is, America would not attempt to proactively

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<sup>1</sup> Kagan, Donald, and Frederick W. Kagan. "Peace for Our Time?" *Commentary*. Pg 42.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. "Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign Policy Debates." *Commentary*. Pg 29, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Ledeen, Michael. "American Power—For What? A Symposium." *Commentary*. Pg 36-37.

change the world order itself, but would instead readily *respond* against any actor or regime hostile to liberal values that did. What constituted an appropriate or successful response can be inferred from example. Looking back at Hitler's march on the Rhineland and Czechoslovakia, both clearly moves of outward aggression, neoconservatives never once argued that the appropriate British response was to depose Hitler and crush the Nazi regime *within* Germany. They argued only that Hitler should have been pushed out of the territories that were not his own.<sup>1</sup> The same goes for the Cold War. During that period most neoconservatives were advocates not of rollback, but of containment, a policy which took a hard line only insofar as it demanded that threats be kept from *spreading*. In the neoconservative mind prior to 1991, the success of a particular military campaign had little to do with how thoroughly it altered the international landscape, and much more to do with how well it had maintained the *status quo*<sup>2</sup>—in other words, whether or not that campaign had successfully confined and bound the evil it targeted.

Post 1991, all of these guideposts began to change. First to be retooled was the neoconservative definition of what sorts of regime and what sorts of behavior ought to be considered a real threat or a real evil (When mentioning real threats it is important to mention the only two that had previously qualified for the title: Nazi Germany and the USSR). Whereas previously the neoconservatives had argued that only expansionist regimes guided by ideologies directly at odds with liberalism ought to qualify, without the Soviet Union in the picture, and thus with a choice of many more potential, much weaker enemies, the neoconservatives became suddenly unable to distinguish between various threats. Robert Kagan openly admits this inability, writing of the post Cold War world: “There is no certainty that we can correctly

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<sup>1</sup> Kagan, Donald, and Frederick W. Kagan. “Peace for Our Time?” *Commentary*. Pg 43.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 25.

distinguish between high-stakes issues and small-stakes issues in time to sound the alarm.”<sup>1</sup> The implication, of course, is that America must involve itself in almost every issue, and, indeed, this is exactly what neoconservatives began to push for.<sup>2</sup> America should become, in the words of Robert Kagan, the world’s “policeman.”<sup>3</sup> Such attitudes, however, are a marked departure from the neoconservative nuance and attention to detail of the past. It was Robert Kagan’s own father, Donald, who once decried the habit of certain commentators to “[treat] nations as interchangeable counters in the game of international relations, who might as well be called A, B, and C,” and pushed instead for a “focus on the positions of the nations in the hierarchy of power, on their view of their own proper place in it, and on their intentions,”<sup>4</sup> when trying to determine the status of threats versus non-threats. Either way, the sudden inability of neoconservatives to do this sort of determining was only the first in a series of departures from their own Cold War strategies.

The second departure was their retooling of the definition of an American military success. Suddenly, neoconservatives were railing against the American interventions in *civil wars* in Somalia and Serbia not because they found those conflicts patently irrelevant, as they almost certainly would have in the past, but because the American efforts in these places were not going far enough.<sup>5</sup> Clinton’s policies were criticized, for example, for aiming only to restore the once revered *status quo*, and for not attempting regional transformation, as neoconservatives now wanted all American action to do. This newfound sense of needing to take interventions to their *ideal*, transformative conclusions is clear in Donald and Frederick Kagan’s complaint,

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<sup>1</sup> Harries, Owen. “American Power—For What?” Commentary. Pg 28.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “The Present Danger.” Pg 30. Also: Ledeen, Michael. “American Power—For What?” Commentary. Pg 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> Kagan, Donald, and Frederick W. Kagan. “Peace for Our Time?” Commentary. Pg 45.

<sup>4</sup> Kagan, Donald. “World War I, World War II, World War III.” Commentary. Pg 31.

<sup>5</sup> Kagan, Donald, and Frederick W. Kagan. “Peace for Our Time?” Commentary. Pg 45.

regarding American action in Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, North Korea, and Kosovo, that: “Almost every one of these crises was resolved to our apparent satisfaction; but the real outcome in each case has been defeat.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the use of the word “defeat” to describe situations in which America acted towards and achieved containment, indicates the start of a new mode for neoconservatives. Moreover, it makes clear that the understanding of what should constitute an American military success had begun to change.

An example of this second phenomenon is the neoconservative narrative of the first Gulf War. That war began because Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, an oil-rich American ally with no means to defend itself. Previously, neoconservatism would have asked only (not that this was an easy task) that America intervene to push Saddam back behind his own borders and then that it impose measures to keep him there. Both of these America did, first by force and then with sanctions, weapons inspections, and the creation of a no-fly zone over Iraqi-Kurdistan. Still, neocons were not satisfied. Michael Ledeen writes: “I was discouraged when we failed to pursue the Gulf War to its logical and necessary conclusion of removing Saddam’s murderous regime.”<sup>2</sup> While neoconservatives never once, through all their discussion of the failures of the British post World War I, proposed that the British should have removed Hitler from power, here they argue that the US should have removed Saddam. The shift in the expectations for a successful military intervention is clear. The question is: why, given the inherent difficulties in replacing any regime, much less one that has spent 15 years centralizing power, did the “logical and necessary conclusion” of American interventions suddenly become regime change and not containment? Why, despite their own admissions at the end of the 1990s that “Saddam is quiescent...there

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<sup>1</sup> Kagan, Donald, and Frederick W. Kagan. “Peace for Our Time?” Commentary. Pg 45.

<sup>2</sup> Ledeen, Michael. “American Power—For What? A Symposium.” Commentary. Pg 37.

even appears to be good news from Korea. [And] Bosnia and Kosovo...are relatively tranquil,”<sup>1</sup> were neoconservatives so openly dissatisfied?

The answer is that, with the end of the Cold War, the neoconservatives had begun, perhaps only subconsciously, to see a notion they had long ridiculed—of an end to history—as actually possible. Though neoconservatives did not realize it themselves, a quick look to the new demands they placed on American foreign policy, including the new definitions of what constituted a real threat and also of what ought to be considered a successful intervention, arguably show that they did indeed fall victim to temptation. All of a sudden, neoconservatives wanted to build an America that would stand watch over the *whole* world, proposing, as no one ever had before, including themselves, a model of global hegemony which aimed to prevent not only those most grave of conflicts, World War II for example, but *all* conflicts—an end to man’s terrible history—period. Of course, nothing is wrong with this vision per se. What is important to recognize, however, is how far ideas of unadulterated and transformative global hegemony stray from the animating concepts of neoconservatism, namely, that man is limited and that therefore it is “impossible to do all things well.”<sup>2</sup> In case not yet clear, poignant reminder of these limited initial ambitions can be found in Irving Kristol’s criticism of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points: “One can almost say this crusade was a penultimate outburst of the isolationist spirit, in that its goal was a happy, self-determined existence for all individuals—*une vie a l’Americaine*—without any further cruel violations of it by international power politics.” As Kristol words hint, the neoconservatives of old patently scorned any efforts to remake the world in some supposedly more perfect form; hence their constant reminders of evils existence, their rejection of utopianism and the USSR, and their embrace of containment. The terrible irony, then, is that the

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<sup>1</sup> Kagan, Donald, and Frederick W. Kagan. “Peace for Our Time?” *Commentary*. Pg 46.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy.” *On the Democratic Idea in America*. Pg 78.

once shameful “*une vie a l’Americaine*,” or, as they now called it, “benevolent global hegemony,”<sup>1</sup> is exactly what neoconservatives began proposing beginning in 1991. Not only that, but such propositions were to lay the foundation for the more dramatic: an actual attempt to use military, economic, and political power to destroy and then more perfectly rebuild first an entire country, Iraq, and then an entire region, the Middle East.

\*\*\* 9/11 and Beyond \*\*\*

Neoconservatives feel that the pair of attacks that occurred on 9/11 “constituted an open declaration of war on the United States and that the war into which it catapulted us was nothing less than another world war.”<sup>2</sup> The new enemy is, according to Norman Podhoretz:

The monster with two heads, one religious and the other secular, that is accordingly best described as Islamofascism...it comes from a religious force that was born in the seventh century, that was schooled politically at the feet of the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, [and] that went on to equip itself with the technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup>...Like the Nazis and Communists before them, they are dedicated to the destruction of the freedoms we cherish and for which America stands.<sup>3</sup>

The title Islamofascist, it should be noted, does not apply here, or in the neoconservative mind ever, only to those that actually attacked America on 9/11, that is, Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. Instead it applies more broadly to every single purveyor of either secular totalitarianism and/or Muslim fundamentalism in the Middle East. The list of Islamofascists therefore includes the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Shi’a Iran, elements of the Saudi regime, Saddam’s Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and any other individual or government that either aids or shelters similar elements.<sup>4</sup> Indeed the list includes some segment of the people and/or the power structure in almost every

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign Policy Debates.” Commentary. Pg 31.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “World War IV.” Pg 2.

<sup>3</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “World War IV.” Pg 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “World War IV.”

single Muslim country of the Middle East and Eurasia, and indicates the emergence, in the words of Martin Kramer, of “a global village of Islamic fundamentalism.”<sup>1</sup> Further, according to neoconservatives, in order for any response to be effective, in the long run it must address the Islamofascists in all these countries, and must involve, given that this is a war, the use of military force. This is not to say that the neoconservatives see a military response as necessary against every Islamofascist contingent, but certainly they see a show of force, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq and potentially elsewhere, as the first step in any counterstrike in the new world war.

In and of itself, of course, the embrace of the use of military force against Islamofascism does not constitute a departure from the neoconservatism of the past. The departure comes into view only when one looks at the new *objectives* of the use of the American military. Those objectives are no longer, as they might have in the past, to do everything possible to contain the Islamofascist threat to within the Middle East and thereby prevent another attack on American soil. Instead they are to dramatically, one could even say radically, transform the entire Middle East—politically into a more democratic space, socially into a less religious place, and economically into a more liberalized place—such that the threat itself will be not just confined, but so that it will disappear altogether. The Middle East would, in other words, have to be “unfrozen” such that “there would be no return to the old arrangements... ‘to the old pact with tyranny.’”<sup>2</sup> “Instead of worrying about the stability of the region in question, [neoconservatives] proposed to destabilize it through ‘regime change.’”<sup>3</sup> Though all of this certainly amounts to a radical departure from the neoconservative containment policies of the past, in the new neoconservative imagination, such departure is just the point: the new world war requires

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<sup>1</sup> Kramer, Martin. “Islam vs. Democracy.” Commentary Pg 39.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “World War IV.” Pg 188.

<sup>3</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “World War IV.” Pg 76.

strategies that went go containment and into preemption. Norman Podhoretz cites George W.

Bush to make the break with containment explicit:

‘New threats require new thinking. Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend...Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction or missiles secretly provide them to terrorist allies.’<sup>1</sup>

Neoconservatives are clearly not trying to hide their break with containment.

So, if neoconservatives are merely evolving with the times, as they portray it, what is the criticism? The problem is that the evolution of thought required between the move away from containment and towards the embrace of “a revolutionary change in the rules of the international game,” amounts to a trade not just of one strategy for another, but of one ideology for another. It requires that the neoconservatives, whether they recognize it or not, walk away from their most fundamental belief in the limits of man, and, instead, travel towards utopianism and its optimism regarding the human condition. Podhoretz’s rejoinder to George Will’s criticism of the War in Iraq makes clear that optimism (and with it historical-downplay) is the path neoconservatives now choose:

Will seemed to think that everything about the greater Middle East was so ancient and deeply rooted that it would naturally repel any effort to change it. But the Middle East as we now know it had been created...by British and French diplomats after World War I out of the rubble of the defeated Ottoman empire. Since these arrangements were less than a century old, there was nothing unrealistic about trying to change them.<sup>2</sup>

Not only does this view disregard many historical realities (Among them: although the British are responsible for the creation of the modern Iraqi state between 1918 and 1932, the statesmen in charge of that project would certainly admit that there was something *unrealistic* about it—it ended with the British abandoning their UN Mandate prematurely because they encountered such

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<sup>1</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “World War IV.” Pg 77.

<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz, Norman. “World War IV.” Pg 175-176.



difficulties in trying to change centuries old social and political habits.), but, for neoconservatives personally, it is so clearly represents a change of tone regarding man, his history, and the powerful relationship between the two.

\*\*\* Conclusion \*\*\*

In 1976, in his article, “The American Revolution,” Irving Kristol articulates beautifully the distinction between a revolution and a rebellion. A revolution, he writes: “Is a political phenomenon. It aims to revise and reorder the political arrangements of society...It requires an attentive prudence, a careful calculation of means and ends, a spirit of sobriety—the kind exemplified by that calm legalistic document, the Declaration of Independence.”<sup>1</sup> A rebellion, on the other hand:

Is a metapolitical event, emerging out of a radical dissatisfaction with the human condition...demanding...an altogether ‘better life’ in an altogether ‘better world.’ The spirit of rebellion is a spirit of desperation...aspiration toward some kind of utopia. A rebellion is more a sociological event than a political action. It is governed by a blind momentum which sweeps everything before it, and its so-called leaders are in fact its captives, and ultimately its victims.<sup>2</sup>

Neoconservatism, I think, though it proceeded in the spirit of revolution for nearly 30 years, has more recently taken on the spirit of a rebellion—against the deplorable state of the Middle East specifically. It is a shift that started in the early 1990s, as neoconservatives began to redefine both the appropriate targets of American intervention and the appropriate gauges of American success, and peaked, after 9/11, when neoconservatives were suddenly overcome, as we all were on some level, with a desire to change the status quo for the better. Unfortunately, in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East, neoconservatives have set out not make conditions simply relatively better, and therefore safer for America, but they have aimed instead to make them objectively good. Had the neoconservatives stayed true to their own ideas, they would be forced

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<sup>1</sup> Kristol, Irving. “The American Revolution.” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 242.

<sup>2</sup> Kristol, Irving. “The American Revolution.” *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. Pg 241.

to admit that such a project is a fantasy. The Middle East cannot become objectively good, in terms of its relationship to liberal values, any time in the near future, and certainly not by force. Both man and America are too limited for that. Indeed, to try to force either man or America to break away from limit would be downright dangerous. Dangerous, and neoconservatives of all people ought to recognize this, because “there is no America waiting in the wings today to save us if we err.”<sup>1</sup>

It is this last lesson which sticks with me, and I hope will stick with the rest of the left, the most. Too often the left allows itself to slip into believing that America is somehow not a blessing, and that it is even a burden, when the reality is just the opposite. We should not forget: Real evil does exist. America is relatively good. And thus America must act in defense of the liberal values it espouses. Accepting these ideas is and should be our revolution. Let us only be careful not to someday forget the patience change requires and thereby slip into rebellion.

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<sup>1</sup> Kagan, Donald and Frederick W. Kagan. “Peace for Our Time?” Commentary Pg 46.