

Neoconservatism and American Foreign Policy

A critical analysis

Danny Cooper



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Neoconservatism and American Foreign Policy

At the time of America's 2003 invasion of Iraq, the term "neoconservative" was enjoying wide currency. To this day, it remains a term that engenders much debate and visceral reaction. The purpose of this book is to engage critically with a set of ideas and beliefs that define the neoconservative approach to American foreign policy, and illuminate many of the core foreign policy debates that have taken place within the United States over the past several years during the administrations of both George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

There is certainly no consensus on how neoconservatism should be defined or thought about. While authors attempt to define neoconservatism in a number of different ways, none adopt a thematic approach that can enable readers to appreciate the contributions of an intellectual community whose ideas will be forever attached to America's decision to go to war against Iraq. This book, therefore, defines neoconservatism through the ideas and beliefs of its leading intellectual activists, casting light on the worldview of one of America's most important and polarizing intellectual communities.

Exploring the historical significance of this ongoing movement and its impact on American foreign policy traditions, this work provides a significant contribution to the literature and will be of great interest to all scholars of foreign policy, American politics and American history.

Danny Cooper is a lecturer at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. His research interests include US foreign policy, international relations, and political leadership.

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To my parents, Greg and Colleen.

And to Doris, my much missed grandmother who was the bravest soul I knew.

Preface

In March 2003, I supported the war against Iraq. I believed in the justifications, the rationale, and I believed in America. Agreeing with many neoconservatives, the subjects of this study, I was convinced that the United States was doing the right thing. Saddam, we all know, was one of the world's worst tyrants. He had used weapons of mass destruction against Iran and the Kurds. He had supported a number of terrorist organizations in the Middle East (al-Qaeda was not among them). And he had invaded neighboring nations. The world, I thought, would be a better place without the Iraqi dictator. That is why I supported George W. Bush's decision to remove him.

Although I have revised my views on the American invasion, I still shed no tears for the removal of Saddam Hussein. Iraq, I sincerely hope, will be better off without him. If any country deserves a future without violence and dictatorship, it is most certainly Iraq. At the time of writing, Iraq has now had its second round of national elections and the Obama administration is *hoping* to be able to withdraw all US combat forces by the end of 2011.

Today, I am more than prepared to acknowledge that I was wrong to support the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The horrors that the invasion unleashed are seldom appreciated or even spoken about in the West today, especially among segments of the American right. As I watched the nightly images of violence after the invasion, I was sure that America would reverse course and correct things. But it took over four years before the Bush administration did anything that would even come close to bringing a semblance of stability to Iraq. Throughout this time, I watched closely. I listened to many of the same neocons who I had once agreed with. How were they responding to the aftermath of Iraq? What lessons could be learned? The more I listened, the more I wished I had my grandmother's option of turning down my hearing aids.

After listening to an endless number of rationalizations for American failure in Iraq, there came a point when I realized that it was not enough to blame the Bush administration for its poor prosecution of the war, as many neoconservatives were inclined to do. The causes of American failure, I felt, went far deeper. It was a failure within the realm of ideas, I concluded. This realization sparked my interest, encouraging me to write this book. I hoped

that if I could critically engage with a body of ideas that may have contributed to America's invasion of Iraq, then perhaps I could play some small role in ensuring that such a catastrophe will not again take place in America's future. This hardly expunges the guilt I feel for having supported such a foolish enterprise, but perhaps it is the first step.

Of course, this book is not solely about Iraq. Nor is it solely about the Bush administration's response to the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. It is about the ideas of a group of intellectuals who believe in American values and American power – a potentially dangerous combination. This book revisits many of the dominant debates that have taken place in discussions on US foreign policy over the past several decades, concluding with a chapter on the Obama administration. The book is not time bound, for the ideas that should define neoconservatism have been refined and articulated over the course of several decades. They will, I suspect, reappear in the future and will find eager and willing spokespersons. But while this book takes up many controversial questions, Iraq hovers over them all. The way I view the ideas of intellectuals will always be influenced by what happened in Iraq. It will do nobody any good, least of all the author of this book, to pretend otherwise.

Danny Cooper

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Below is a very brief list of scholars, colleagues, and family members who have provided a degree of support which has made this project both possible, and even a little enjoyable.

Before I identify three colleagues in particular, I sincerely thank all those who have read segments of this book, and commented on its contents. Of course, I also thank Professor Inderjeet Parmar and Professor John Dumbrell for agreeing to include the book in their series on US foreign policy.

First, I sincerely thank Associate Professor Martin Griffiths. Martin is an expert in international relations theory and American foreign policy, and has been a much needed fount of insight, guidance, and humor. He contributed significantly to the framing of the argument in this book, and was always forthcoming with suggestions that have undoubtedly improved the final product. Martin has regularly made himself available to discuss my ideas and allay my never ending concerns, for which I am very grateful.

Second, I am very much indebted to Professor John Kane. John is an expert in political theory and American foreign policy, and his expertise was both needed and appreciated as he read and made comments on the final draft of this book. As a former student of his, I am glad to have had an opportunity to work with John on this project as his advice has never failed to point me in the right direction.

Third, I thank Associate Professor Brendon O'Connor. Although Brendon was a big part of this project until he left to take up a new position at the United States Studies Center in Sydney, he has remained an important source of advice. As I have moved along in the world of academia, Brendon has always been willing to review my work, generally in a supervisory role. He has served as a very valuable mentor for me. If I owe anyone in the academic field for whatever small portion of success I may yet attain, it is surely Brendon.

So far as my personal life is concerned, I thank all those friends and family members who have provided moments of levity and comfort over the past several years. Katja Styr, my soon to be wife, has never wavered in her support and faith in me. My next book (fingers crossed that there will be a *next* book!) will be dedicated to her. Also I thank my best friend,

Veenal Murti. In eight years, Veenal and I have rarely, if ever, had a serious conversation. His comedic relief is often needed and always appreciated. We will, I suspect, be laughing at the world for a number of years to come.

Finally, I thank my parents for always being there for me, providing a never ending stream of support and advice. Without them, nothing would have been possible. They taught me, albeit in their own unique ways, the importance of the one thing President Harry S. Truman said could never be taken away from a person: an honorable reputation and a good name.

When an idea, whether just or unreasonable, takes possession of the American mind, nothing is more difficult than to get rid of it.

(Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835)

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1 Introduction

Those who write about neoconservatism often struggle to define it. Is a neo-conservative “a liberal who has been mugged by reality,” as Irving Kristol, the progenitor of neoconservatism, once quipped? Is neoconservatism a “Jewish mindset,” one shaped by the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, as many claim?¹ Or are neoconservatives, as some imply, best thought of as an institutional network of like-minded thinkers who spend their lives writing for think-tanks and journals, jostling for influence over those elected to lead?² In contrast, neoconservatism, I argue, should be defined by the ideas and beliefs of its leading intellectuals, especially those who write most prolifically on American foreign policy.

Neoconservatives remain as relevant today as they were in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. They have been an integral part of America’s national life for several decades, writing on both domestic and foreign policy. Even when they appear marginalized, neo-conservatives are always preparing for the future, knowing that nothing is permanent in American politics. If their ideas are to shape the future, neo-conservatives know that they must be developed at times when their prospects of shaping policy appear dim. And the goal today, they know, must be to wage a war of ideas, in the nation’s newspapers, in its colleges, on cable TV, and in the think-tanks.

The term “neoconservative” itself is one that engenders much debate and visceral reaction. There is certainly no consensus on how neoconservatism should be defined or thought about, although there have been no shortage of observers who have been eager to apply the label to whomever they hope it will taint. As Douglas Murray fairly argues, “Rarely has a term been thrown around so wildly while its meaning remains so popularly elusive” (2006: xvi). All studies on neoconservatism attempt to demystify its meaning, this one included.

The first two chapters of this book will indulge many of the customary academic expectations associated with producing a work of scholarship – outlining the argument to follow, explaining the merits of the adopted methodology, and reviewing the existing literature. Yet it is important to note that neoconservatives retain considerable relevance and significance not only

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because of their own ideas and alleged influence over the Bush administration, but because of what their ideas and beliefs may tell us about America and its political culture. There has always been a considerable amount of ideational continuity in policy debates in the United States, especially in the realm of American foreign policy, which is the field in which this study primarily concerns itself. In his superbly written account of America's foreign policy traditions, Walter Russell Mead argues, "many of the ideas and alternatives present in contemporary discussions would have been familiar to American politicians and thinkers throughout our history" (2002: 87).

The debates neoconservatives have engaged in are not that different from the debates that have taken place in America's past. There are, of course, unique features of neoconservatism meriting emphasis. But many of the dilemmas and challenges neoconservatives confront have been dilemmas and challenges long confronted by American statesmen and intellectuals of both the highest and lowest caliber. How should the national interest be defined? What role should ideology play in the conduct of American foreign policy? What should America's contribution be to creating a more orderly world? How should American power be employed? These are questions that Americans have faced since the birth of their republic. Sometimes the answers provided to such questions have been wise, sometimes they have been reckless. Should America be a "promised land" or a "crusader state," a question at the forefront of Walter McDougall's thoughtful history on American foreign policy? (1997). Neoconservatives have answered this question with no less conviction and sincerity than have preceding generations of intellectuals and policy-makers.

Neoconservatives, it must be noted, do not see America as an ordinary country. But then, as John Kane persuasively argues, neither America nor the world has ever seen America as ordinary (2008: 425). The sense of national mission and exceptionalism infusing the country's political culture, according to Anatol Lieven, has made "it much more difficult for most Americans to imagine the United States as a country among others or an 'international community' that includes America as a member rather than a hegemon" (2006: 63).

This has always had consequences for the way in which America has responded to the problem of world order. When the Cold War ended, much was made about the arrival of a "unipolar moment." As I argue at length in a later chapter, the strategic logic supporting neoconservative calls to perpetuate American military preponderance, while arguably flawed, was quite sophisticated. But the calls were also overlaid by the belief that only America could be trusted to wield such enormous power. Reinforcing this sense was Ben Wattenberg's observation that "A unipolar world is a good thing, if America is the uni" (cited in Dorrien 1993: 330). Such observations are a product of a national faith in the fundamental goodness of America. "This belief in American innocence, of 'original sinlessness,' is both very old and very powerful," Lieven argues (2006: 53).

So while neoconservatives were among the loudest supporters of the 2003 Iraq War, the questions they have attempted to answer are questions that have been asked by generations of Americans. Their answers provide one set of alternatives to questions that have frustrated the American mind. Enmeshed in America's national life, neoconservatives have taken part in some of the most pressing and significant foreign policy debates, making an understanding of America's modern history incomplete if their contributions go without scrutiny.

When the Nixon–Kissinger administration reached out to China and pursued détente with the Soviet Union, neoconservatives and “Scoop” Jackson Democrats aired the loudest protests. When Ronald Reagan found a willing negotiating partner in Mikhail Gorbachev, neoconservatives spoke out against the false expectations of international summitry. When 19 Middle Eastern terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners on 11 September 2001 turning them into missiles which destroyed the World Trade Center and parts of the Pentagon, neoconservatives were quick to shape the national debate. Whatever the national challenge, neoconservatives have always had a ready stockpile of ideas and beliefs promising to usher in a less dangerous world.

The purpose of this book is to define neoconservatism through the ideas and beliefs of its leading foreign policy intellectuals. The book's fundamental premise is that neoconservatives must be understood as they understand themselves. Ideas must be taken seriously by those studying neoconservatism, if only because they are taken so seriously by neoconservatives. The chapter begins by arguing that a thematic and ideational approach to studying neoconservatism yields insights which illuminate the main foreign policy goals of neoconservatives. It also begins by analyzing the importance neoconservatives assign to ideas in politics, focusing specifically on the two intellectuals who gave neoconservatism its distinctive cast, Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz.

Although they have been the subject of much academic inquiry and extravagant commentary, no scholar has rigorously examined neoconservative ideas and beliefs collectively.³ I attempt to fill this void. Before these ideas and beliefs are examined, however, this chapter defends the adopted approach and methodology, and clarifies several points of contention raised by those who have written about neoconservatism. No question has been as hotly contested as the question of neoconservative “influence” over the Bush administration. It is important to understand, though, that whatever one's views on this question, neoconservatives do aspire to shape policy. Just as importantly, if not more so, they aspire to foster an intellectual climate hospitable to their ideas and beliefs. It is for this reason that neoconservative ideas must be taken seriously even at a time when they appear to have lost some of their post-11 September magnetism.

While neoconservatism was initially associated with domestic policies relating to the overambitiousness of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs, this book focuses exclusively on international affairs. At the end of the

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Cold War, neoconservatism was no longer a distinctive force in the realm of domestic policy. Irving Kristol had explained that it “was a generational phenomenon, and has now been pretty much absorbed into a larger, more comprehensive conservatism” (1995: 40). While this remained true in the realm of domestic policy, it was not exactly true in the realm of foreign policy, a field in which neoconservatives retained a distinctive set of foreign policy ideas. In fact, neoconservatism is now almost exclusively identified with American foreign policy.

It has often been said by neoconservatives, both throughout the Johnson years of alleged domestic overreach and in international politics, that “ideas have consequences,” so much so that it has become something of a trite observation. Yet the assertion’s widespread acceptance should not undercut its significance. Neoconservatives have spent most of their careers surveying the ideational terrain, making sure that no “threatening” ideas were left unchecked. It is, therefore, imperative that neoconservative ideas and beliefs receive the same level of attention that neoconservatives extend to others. Although few intellectuals challenge the claim that “ideas have consequences,” few have devoted themselves as wholeheartedly to an intellectual life guided by this maxim as have the neoconservatives whose work I examine in the following pages.

Defining neoconservatism: the case for an ideational and thematic approach

Neoconservatism has no simple definition. Those who write about it adopt a number of approaches. Without doubt the most widely utilized approach is that which emphasizes the ideological conversion experienced by neoconservatives in two distinct phases throughout the twentieth century. Neoconservatism is often defined first by the experience of the New York intellectuals who, following America’s victory in World War II, abandoned their flirtation with Trotskyism and by and large embraced liberal anticommunism.⁴ Second, neoconservatism is just as often defined through the experience of a group of disillusioned Democrats who, following America’s defeat in Vietnam and the Democratic Party’s subsequent embrace of McGovernism,⁵ abandoned the Democratic Party, left what they believed was a sullied and corrupted form of modern liberalism, and became intellectual foot soldiers in the Reagan revolution.⁶ Neoconservatism, in this narrative, is defined by the ideological conversion experienced by its leading intellectuals.

Those who have written a historical narrative emphasizing this ideological conversion, including neoconservatives themselves such as Norman Podhoretz, have left behind a valuable resource for future researchers to consult, scrutinize, and rely on.⁷ Yet the definition’s current relevance and utility should be questioned. Many of today’s most influential neoconservatives such as William Kristol, Irving’s son, have not undergone an ideological conversion, and have had little, if any, experience on the left. Moreover, when