

U.S.S.R. founder and former commander of the Soviet Army Leon Trotsky, a Bolshevik revolutionary and Marxist intellectual

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Neoconservatism's Deadly Influence

A look at the roots of neoconservatism and the reasons why this deadly movement must be rejected in favor of the true conservatism as envisioned by our Founders.

by John F. McManus

A neoconservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality.

— Irving Kristol

The above definition has joyfully and repeatedly been cited by many defenders of neoconservatism. They consider their branch of political thought a benign movement even though its clout has been recognized as dominant over the Bush administration. Kristol likely hopes that everyone who learns of his quip will emit a slight chuckle and remain convinced that neoconservatism is no threat to the nation.

But Irving Kristol, who has willingly accepted the title of “Godfather of Neoconservatism,” earlier produced a more incisive definition of the movement he helped to create. In his 1995 book *Neoconservatism: the Autobiography of an Idea*, he wrote:

It describes the erosion of liberal faith among a relatively small but talented and articulate group ... (which gradually gained more recruits) toward a more conservative point of view: conservative but different in certain

respects from the conservatism of the Republican party. We ... accepted the New Deal in principle, and had little affection for the kind of isolationism that then permeated American conservatism.

There you have it: neoconservatism's most prominent adherent wants it to be linked to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal socialism and, because of its rejection of “isolationism,” to be further identified as a champion of meddling in the affairs of other nations. The opposite of isolationism, of course, is interventionism, a tactic favored by all neoconservatives. Earlier, in 1983, Kristol claimed that “a conservative welfare state is perfectly consistent with the neoconservative perspective.” Old-line conservatives would justly label the phrase “conservative welfare state” a classic oxymoron. By 1993, in a piece he authored for the *Wall Street Journal*, the Godfather lauded Social Security, Medicare, food stamps, and Medicaid, even a cash allowance for the children of unwed mothers. Virtually any socialist program can count on support from the neoconservative camp.

As for interventionist meddling, neoconservative Charles Krauthammer can-

didly presented the movement's attitude in a 1989 article appearing in Kristol's journal, *The National Interest*. Boldly calling for the integration of the United States, Europe, and Japan, he yearned for a “super-sovereign” state that would be “economically, culturally, and politically hegemonic in the world.” Not satisfied with such a novel creation, he further urged a “new universalism [which] would require the conscious depreciation not only of American sovereignty but of the notion of sovereignty in general.” And he added: “This is not as outrageous as it sounds.” Maybe not to a neoconservative, but a real conservative and especially a constitutionalist wouldn't hesitate for a moment in labeling such ideas “outrageous.”

Neoconservatism's Roots

During the 1960s and into the 1970s, the “small but talented and articulate group” Kristol haughtily described sought a new home for its ideology. Leftists to the core, most were followers of Leon Trotsky, the revolutionary communist leader who was expelled from Russia following a power struggle with Stalin in the 1920s. They didn't like Stalin, but they did like the style of communism advocated by Trotsky. In his 1995 book *Neoconservatism*, Kristol

proudly stated, “I regard myself as lucky to have been a young Trotskyite and I have not a single bitter memory.” As students of the communist movement well know, Trotsky broke with Stalin in 1927 merely over which tactics would best succeed in achieving the world domination each sought. Run out of Russia by his former partner in monstrous crime, Trotsky ended up in Mexico, never renounced his desire to communize or socialize the world, and went to his Maker when one of Stalin’s henchmen plunged an axe into his skull in 1940.

The Trotsky link provides a key to understanding neoconservatives. Writing in 1995 in the CFR journal *Foreign Affairs* about John Erhman’s *The Rise of Neoconservatism*, reviewer John Judis confirmed that “the other important influence on neo-conservatives was the legacy of Trotsky.... Many of the founders of neoconservatism including *The Public Interest* founder Irving Kristol ... were either members of or close to the Trotskyite left in the late 1930s and early 1940s.” Other important early leaders of the movement included *Commentary* Editor Norman Podhoretz, his wife Midge Decter, Ben Wattenberg, Edward Luttwak, Elliott Abrams, Carl Gershman, Michael Ledeen, and Nathan Glazer. Among later adherents could be found Michael Novak, William Bennett, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Daniel Moynihan, *Wall Street Journal* editorialist Robert Bartley, and Kristol’s son William, who currently presides over *The Weekly Standard*.

Many of the early neocons were Democrats. But in 1972, they were repulsed by the Democratic candidacy of George McGovern because of his isolationism and his embrace of the countercultural excesses of the New Left (drugs, free love, radical feminism, homosexuality, etc.). What they saw propelled the early neocons to seek a new home in the Republican Party. Irving Kristol explained that the South Dakota senator’s strident opposition to the Vietnam War and willing acceptance of the New Left’s attack on traditional values “signified that the Democratic Party was not hospitable to any degree of neoconservatism.” He wrote that he and a few others arrived at the “obvious conclusion that we would have to try to find a home in the Republican party.” Find a home they did! And they were giddily accepted, not only by liberal Republicans but also by many



The countercultural excesses of the New Left during the 1972 Democratic candidacy of Sen. George McGovern (center) encouraged neoconservatism’s godfather and others to move to the GOP. Pictured at McGovern’s right during a campaign stop in Little Rock, Arkansas, is a youthful campaign worker named Bill Clinton.

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anti-communist GOP conservatives who seemed oblivious to the fact they were welcoming socialists and internationalists into their midst.

Neocons didn’t exert much influence during the Ford- and Carter-led 1970s, although many more moved into the GOP. They found they had a good friend in Ronald Reagan when he courted them during his 1980 campaign and then gave several of them administration posts when he triumphed. Long on pleasing rhetoric but short on comparable performance, Reagan named Jeane Kirkpatrick ambassador to the UN, and Richard Perle and Elliott Abrams were given posts in the Defense Department. To a man, neocons joined Kristol in praising Reagan for being “the first Republican president to pay tribute to Franklin D. Roosevelt.”

More Neocon Successes

No review of the rise of neoconservative prominence is complete without noting the role played by William F. Buckley in bringing it about. In 1991, Buckley sponsored an invitation-only, three-day conference for two dozen conservative Republicans. Enthusiastically described by Kristol, the event saw attendees arrive as conservatives first, but “by the end of the meeting, a significant reversal had occurred.... Most were Republicans first and conservatives second.” They would now accept increased taxation, more federal

controls, and the use of America’s military under UN auspices to build George H.W. Bush’s “new world order.” (Though Bush never defined the term “new world order,” it has long been known to mean socialism and world government, the cardinal tenets of neoconservatism.) Newly identifiable neocons in the first Bush administration included Defense Department leaders Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, and Richard Perle. Delighted to be in charge of the world’s only remaining superpower, they set out to use America’s armed might to force their brand of “democracy” on the world.

Buckley’s little-known preference for the neocon agenda, both its foreign and domestic policy elements, deserves mention. In 1952, while he was serving in the CIA in what he later termed a “deep cover” assignment in Mexico, the widely accepted leader of American conservatism wrote in *Commonweal* magazine of the need for “Big Government for the duration,” and for

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“large armies and air forces, atomic energy, central intelligence, war production boards and the attendant centralization of power in Washington — even with Truman at the reins of it all.” Even before Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and other neocon luminaries, and even before anyone had even heard the term neoconservative, Buckley was promoting its agenda. More than any other individual, Buckley succeeded during 50 years of clever duplicity in taking real conservatives away from their roots and into the grasp of the neocons.*

In a 1996 edition of *The Essential Neoconservative Reader*, editor Mark Gerson jubilantly observed, “The neoconservatives have so changed conservatism that what we now identify as conservatism is largely what was once neoconservatism. And in so doing, they have defined the way vast numbers of Americans view the economy, their polity, and their society.” In that same year, veteran conservative columnist Sam Francis observed:

As the Cold War wound down, “exporting democracy” and opposing “isolationism” became the major neoconservative foreign policy goals, reflected in their almost universal support for NAFTA, the World Trade Organization, and United Nations “peacekeeping” missions.

Francis and Gerson, holders of completely contradictory views about the neocon takeover, were nevertheless in solid agreement about its success. A steady stream of neocon policy began flowing from such Washington-based think tanks as the Committee on the Present Danger, American Enterprise Institute, Project for the New American Century, the National Endowment for Democracy, and more.

When the 1994 elections produced huge Republican victories, Irving Kristol considered the stunning GOP success a neocon triumph. He knew, as many others did not, that GOP leader Newt Gingrich would be his ally. The Georgia Republican who was to become House Speaker had backed federal aid to education, land controls, for-



Pied piper: *National Review* founder William F. Buckley led conservatives astray to a thinly disguised liberal/internationalist ideology now known as neoconservatism. He is shown here when he ran for mayor of New York City in 1965.

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eign aid, NAFTA, GATT (which became the WTO), the Mexican bailout, the Export-Import Bank, the use of U.S. military force to “democratize” the world, the United Nations, and whatever else would take America away from limited government and non-intervention. His vaunted “Contract with America” was largely inconsequential fluff that kept the GOP from relying on the Constitution. Buckley and the neoconservatives were delighted, and the proud owner of *National Review* saluted Gingrich as a “greatly gifted” leader. There was little objection from the Clinton White House.

In 2003, one Republican congressman who has never been swept into the neoconservative camp addressed his colleagues in a speech entitled “Neoconned.” Dr. Ron Paul noted that replacing the Clinton Democrats with the George W. Bush Republicans “has not made a difference.” He attributed the lack of change to neoconservatives who had “diligently worked their way into positions of power and influence.” Among the modern-day neocons he named were Richard Perle, Elliott Abrams, William Kristol, Michael Ledeen, James Woolsey, Bill Bennett, Frank Gaffney, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld. The redoubtable Texan then summed up the problem facing our nation:

Neoconservatism is not the philosophy of free markets and a wise

foreign policy. Instead, it represents big-government welfare at home and a program of using our military might to spread their version of American values throughout the world.

In his speech, Paul condemned American Enterprise leader Michael Ledeen’s 1999 characterization of the attack on Pearl Harbor as a “lucky” event that led our nation away from neutrality. Ledeen had actually longed for another such event that could be used to entangle our nation in more overseas adventures. Paul also pointed to the Project for the New American Century’s hope expressed in 2000 for “a Pearl Harbor event” that he said “would galvanize the American people to support their ambitious plans to ensure political and economic domination of the world.”

Paul never accused neocons of support for or knowledge of the 9/11 event, but he stated very clearly that it has been used “to promote an agenda that strict constitutionalists and devotees of the Founders of this nation find appalling.”

After listing 17 neocon beliefs, each of which he rejects, the Texas congressman urged that those responsible for fastening neoconservatism on America must be “exposed” and “their philosophy of pervasive government intrusion rejected.” Count this author and this magazine in solid agreement. ■

* See John F. McManus’ book *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Pied Piper for the Establishment* for the history of why Buckley became the favorite of liberals and neocons.