

Review Essay

# Trotskyism to Anachronism

## The Neoconservative Revolution

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*The Rise of Neoconservatism : Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs 1945-1994.* BY JOHN EHRMAN. New Haven: Yale University Press 1995, 256 pp. \$27.50.

For 14 years, from the 1973 Jackson-Vanik amendment until the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, a group of intellectuals known as neoconservatives shaped, and sometimes dominated, American foreign policy. They wrote for *Commentary*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and later *The National Interest*. They acted through organizations like the Committee on the Present Danger and the Committee for the Free World. They held important positions in the AFL-CIO leadership and in the office of Senator Henry M. Jackson, then the most powerful Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee. And during Ronald Reagan's first term, they occupied influential posts in the State and Defense Departments.

George Washington University historian John Ehrman has recounted how these intellectuals' views on foreign policy developed and, once they were ascendant, changed. His book is well written, and, while some of his choices of people are eccentric, many of his comments about particular neoconservatives are insightful. Ehrman's overall history, however, is skewed.

Ehrman describes neoconservatism as the fourth phase in the development of liberal foreign policy. The first was Cold War liberalism, which he identifies with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center*, Reinhold Niebuhr's essays, and the Truman administration's hawkish National Security Council report, NSC-68, drafted in 1950 under the supervision of Paul Nitze. The second was the left-wing revisionism of the 1960s, which he identifies chiefly with historian William Appleman Williams and disciples like Richard Barnet. The third was the neoliberal synthesis by political scientists Stanley Hoffmann and Zbigniew Brzezinski, which stressed world order and interdependence over containment and polarization. Neoconservatism arose as a reaction to both left-wing revisionism and neoliberalism and as a reaffirmation of Cold War liberalism. The

neoconservatives, writes Ehrman, stood for "continued adherence to the vital center idea of an activist anticommunist foreign policy." They were Cold War liberals who searched for a Truman in the 1970s and found Reagan.

Ehrman's history recalls that of Commentary editor Norman Podhoretz in his 1980 book, *The Present Danger*. But Podhoretz and other neoconservatives who took this view had an ulterior motive. Just as conservative economists of the time were trying to portray the Kemp-Roth tax cuts as a reprise of the Kennedy administration's tax cuts, Podhoretz and the neoconservatives were trying to attract discontented Democrats to the Republican side by portraying their own doctrine as the true heir of Truman liberalism. Ehrman takes these arguments at face value. This version of neoconservative history mistakes a part, and a small part at that, for a more complex whole.

Some neoconservatives, like former Hubert Humphrey speechwriter Ben Wattenberg, could indeed be called unreconstructed Cold War liberals. But most followed different trajectories. The dominant strain of neoconservatism in the 1970s was a mixture of the geopolitical militarism of Nitze's NSC-68 and a kind of inverted Trotskyism or socialist internationalism. It owed little to Schlesinger's Vital Center or to memories of the Truman doctrine. A less dominant strain could be traced back to Niebuhr's realism, but it also bore little resemblance to Schlesinger's liberalism. It was centrist only in the sense that the center of American politics had shifted markedly to the right.

## HEATING THE COLD WAR

One must begin by pulling apart the different strands of Cold War liberalism that Ehrman weaves into one. Niebuhr, Schlesinger, and Nitze were all anticommunists and Truman supporters in 1948, but they had very different views of the Cold War. Niebuhr warned against the "soft utopianism" of liberals like Schlesinger who believed that through a long-term struggle of ideas, communism would crumble, and a kind of democratic world government would emerge. Niebuhr was wary of foreign policy becoming a quasi-religious crusade - whether for freedom or communism. He was a balance-of-power, national-interest realist in the same tradition as Walter Lippmann, Hans Morgenthau, and George F. Kennan. Although Schlesinger and Nitze both embraced the struggle with communism, they interpreted it quite differently. In *The Vital Center*, Schlesinger, with a view toward the independent Yugoslavian communist leader Marshal Tito, portrayed world communism as beginning to fragment, even hinting at a future Sino-Soviet split; in NSC-68, Nitze portrays communism as a Soviet-led monolith. Schlesinger was optimistic about American prospects of eventually toppling communism without another world war; Nitze described the United States as being in "mortal danger" and "the deepest peril" from a Soviet Union that was on the verge (even in 1950) of becoming militarily superior. Schlesinger saw the United States engaged in a worldwide political struggle against communism; Nitze saw the Cold War as a real war. He argued that if the United States permitted communist expansion anywhere else, it "would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin could be assembled." Schlesinger's logic led to

the Alliance for Progress; Nitze's led to American intervention in Vietnam and to periodic hysteria about missile gaps and windows of vulnerability.

Nitze's vision in NSC-68 was also fundamentally different from Niebuhr's realism. NSC-68 did not envisage spheres of influence or a balance of power. It committed the United States to a crusade against communism everywhere. Where Niebuhr's realism led to his own opposition to the Vietnam War and informed the attempt by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to achieve détente with the Soviet Union, Nitze's outlook in NSC-68 underlay neoconservative opposition to détente. In the 1970s, Nitze himself was an important neoconservative who, along with legal scholar Eugene V. Rostow, founded the Committee on the Present Danger. Like other neoconservatives, he was a harsh critic of Jimmy Carter and supported Reagan in 1980, later joining his administration. It was his rather than Schlesinger's or Niebuhr's outlook that became the dominant strain in neoconservatism. It could be seen in the rejection of détente and the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II), the conception of the Cold War as a real war, the claim that the United States was on the verge of being or had already been bypassed by the Soviet Union in military might, which would lead to what the neoconservatives called the "Finlandization" of Western Europe.

The other important influence on neoconservatives was the legacy of Trotskyism – a point that other historians and journalists have made about neoconservatism but that eludes Ehrman. Many of the founders of neoconservatism, including The Public Interest founder Irving Kristol and coeditor Nathan Glazer, Sidney Hook, and Albert Wohlstetter, were either members of or close to the Trotskyist left in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Younger neoconservatives, including Penn Kemble, Joshua Muravchik, and Carl Gershman, came through the Socialist Party at a time when former Trotskyist Max Schachtman was still a commanding figure.

What both the older and younger neoconservatives absorbed from their socialist past was an idealistic concept of internationalism. Trotskyists believed that Stalin, in trying to build socialism in one country rather than through world revolution, had created a degenerate workers' state instead of a genuine dictatorship of the proletariat. In the framework of international communism, the Trotskyists were rabid internationalists rather than realists and nationalists. In 1939, as a result of the Nazi-Soviet pact, the Trotskyist movement split, with one faction under James Burnham and Max Schachtman declaring itself opposed equally to German Nazism and Soviet communism. Under the influence of an Italian Trotskyist, Bruno Rizzi, Burnham and Schachtman envisaged the Nazi and Soviet bureaucrats and American managers as part of a new class. While Burnham broke with the left and became an editor at National Review, Schachtman remained.

The neoconservatives who went through the Trotskyist and socialist movements came to see foreign policy as a crusade, the goal of which was first global socialism, then social democracy, and finally democratic capitalism. They never saw foreign policy in terms of national interest or balance of power. Neoconservatism was a kind of inverted Trotskyism,

which sought to "export democracy," in Muravchik's words, in the same way that Trotsky originally envisaged exporting socialism. It saw its adversaries on the left as members or representatives of a public sector-based new class.

The neoconservatives also got their conception of intellectual and political work from their socialist past. They did not draw the kind of rigid distinction between theory and practice that many academics and politicians do. Instead they saw theory as a form of political combat and politics as an endeavor that should be informed by theory. They saw themselves as a cadre in a cause rather than as strictly independent intellectuals. And they were willing to use theory as a partisan weapon.

Together, the legacy of NSC-68 and Trotskyism contributed to a kind of apocalyptic thinking. The constant reiteration and exaggeration of the Soviet threat was meant to dramatize and win converts, but it also reflected the doomsday revolutionary mentality that characterized the old left. Even the sober historian Walter Laqueur predicted in 1974 the imminence of a "major international upheaval such as the world has not experienced since World War II." In 1979 Eugene Rostow (who was named after socialist Eugene Debs) predicted that if salt ii were ratified, "We will be taking not a step toward peace but a leap toward the day when a president of the United States will have to choose between the surrender of vital interests and nuclear holocaust."

## THE KILLING OF DÉTENTE

What is the contribution of neoconservatism to American foreign policy? In the early 1970s, it was clearly a corrective to the illusions about the Soviet Union and Third World revolution that the new left had promulgated and that some liberals had accepted. (As a former member of Students for a Democratic Society, I can personally attest to this point.) But neoconservative foreign policy rested on illusions of its own – about the imminent Soviet threat and the window of vulnerability that would open if the United States did not rapidly accelerate its strategic weapons development. Neoconservatives may also have played a role in postponing rather than accelerating the end of the Cold War, which is not to be confused with the end of the Soviet Union itself.

In describing the neoconservatives of the 1970s, Ehrman focuses on their opposition to Senator George McGovern and Carter but largely ignores their opposition to Kissinger, which was just as important to their development as a political faction and their impact on American foreign policy. Neoconservatives scored their first important triumph challenging Nixon and Kissinger's realism. The Nixon-Kissinger strategy was aimed at drawing the Soviet Union into a new "structure of peace" through the balance of power with China and exchanging trade for diplomatic and military cooperation. In 1973 Jackson and the neoconservatives who worked with him, including Wohlstetter protégé Richard Perle, began a campaign to link trade concessions to the Soviet Union to explicit Soviet concessions on Jewish emigration. Jackson, Perle, and other neoconservatives were concerned about Jewish emigration, but they were equally, if not more, determined to

derail détente, which they thought was based on a false picture of the world and the Soviet Union. They rejected Kissinger's realism in the same spirit that Trotskyists had earlier rejected Stalin's nationalism. In response, the Soviets offered private concessions, but Jackson and the neoconservatives insisted on passing Jackson-Vanik. The Soviets then balked at complying with its terms, and détente, from that moment, was dead. The United States could seek agreements with the Soviet Union based on mutual interest, but it could not pursue a general strategy aimed at ending the Cold War.

In retrospect, of course, neoconservatives could argue that the Soviet Union would have simply used détente as a cover for its imperial aims. And the Watergate scandal may have made it impossible for Nixon, Kissinger, and Gerald Ford to carry out their end of a détente strategy. But--Watergate aside--I would argue that by killing détente, the neoconservatives encouraged the Soviet Union to undertake the military buildup and expansion of its influence overseas that the neoconservatives later used as proof of their theories. Neoconservatism was a self-fulfilling prophecy. It helped precipitate the crisis in U.S.-Soviet relations that it then claimed to uncover and respond to.

During the Carter administration, neoconservatives were on firm ground in warning of the Soviet military buildup and Soviet expansion into Africa and the Mideast, but as heirs of Trotsky and Nitze's NSC-68, they were prone to exaggerating the dangers. They saw the Soviet buildup not as an expression of the Soviet military's insatiable appetite for state funds, but as the quest for a first-strike superiority over the United States. They downplayed the importance of American submarine superiority and overplayed the importance of Soviet heavy land missiles. And they ignored the Soviet economy, even after one of their own, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, had begun warning of its deterioration. In making their case for a Soviet behemoth, they did not simply undercut the Carter administration's inept foreign policy. They laid the basis for the massive and at least partly unnecessary American arms buildup, which may have accelerated the decline of the Soviet Union but also contributed to the decline of the American economy--leading, among other things, to the crippling deficits of the 1980s. And they contributed to a dangerous war psychology in the early 1980s, which could have led to disaster but was finally put to rest by Reagan's conciliatory 1985 summit with Mikhail Gorbachev at Geneva. All in all, the neoconservatives had a decidedly mixed effect on U.S. foreign policy.

## THE FALL OF NEOCONSERVATISM

After Gorbachev's accession and the initiation of serious negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union, the neoconservatives entered, Ehrman notes, "a period of increased confusion." These events undermined a political worldview that assumed a "stable malevolent Soviet Union that was immune from drastic change." Ehrman describes the result as a shift away from Commentary toward Owen Harries' *The National Interest* and from the older generation of neoconservatives to a younger one led by Charles Krauthammer, which "will be an important part of the conservative movement."

This is a plausible way to understand the last decade of neoconservatism, but not the most revealing. I would draw a distinction between the dominant idealistic strain of neoconservatism, expressed by Podhoretz and Rostow in the 1970s, and a less visible realist strain that appeared, but did not necessarily predominate, in essays by Kristol and Jeane Kirkpatrick. In "Dictatorship and Double Standards," which appeared in *Commentary* in January 1979, Kirkpatrick is remembered for arguing that capitalist autocracies were more likely to evolve into democracies than were communist dictatorships. But in that essay, she also made the Niebuhrian point that American foreign policy should not be based on the difficult promise of an imminent democratic transformation--whether in Nicaragua or Chile. This latter point was ignored in the formulation of policy and in public debate. But by the mid-1980s, the latent realism that it represented asserted itself in the thinking of Kristol, Kirkpatrick, and several other neoconservatives, allowing them to appreciate that the Cold War was ending and that a new foreign policy was necessary. (Ehrman's confusion on this point is clear in his emphasis on *National Interest* co-editor Robert Tucker, who is an important foreign policy thinker but a realist who, except for one notable cover story in *Commentary*, was never important to the rise of the neoconservative movement.)

Did Kristol and Harries create a new neoconservatism? I don't think so. It is more accurate to say that many neoconservatives, among others Kirkpatrick, Chalmers Johnson, and Edward N. Luttwak, have become realists. They have allied themselves with other refugees from liberalism and conservatism who think that post--Cold War American foreign policy has to be grounded in the venerable concepts of national interest, balance of power, and economic as well as military advantage. They no longer define their foreign policy primarily in opposition to a liberal or left-wing alternative, but to an idealism that has no particular political label. Some younger neoconservatives like Krauthammer initially seemed engaged in updating neoconservatism – replacing the Soviet threat with that of Iraq-style "aggressive nationalisms" – but they also seem to have gravitated toward a new realism. Scattered individuals still see themselves redefining neoconservatism for the post-Cold War period. Joshua Muravchik and Ben Wattenberg have argued that even with the Cold War over, the United States should continue a crusade for global democracy – what Wattenberg calls a new "manifest destiny." But they are largely irrelevant to the policy debate. As the American public's reaction to Bosnia demonstrated, Americans have little taste for intervening overseas when they do not see a direct threat to their national interest. Some neoconservatives have also continued to press for other parts of the old agenda. Frank Gaffney, Jr., a former Defense Department aide to Perle, has founded a miniature think tank, the Center for Security Policy, where, with funding from defense contractors, he has argued strenuously for greater defense spending and a hard line against the former Soviet Union. Gaffney actually got House Republicans to include increased funding for the strategic defense initiative in the "Contract With America," but they killed it once they had to weigh its importance against the threat of growing deficits.

None of these neoconservatives, whether or not they still identify themselves as such, continue to operate as a cadre. Indeed, they frequently disagree--about Bosnia, Haiti, and even whom to support for president. Both the Committee on the Present Danger and the Committee for the Free World have disbanded. If neoconservatism exists in the 1990s, it is much the way that the new left survived into the 1980s – as cultural nostalgia rather than distinct politics. Muravchik, Wattenberg, and Gaffney are political anachronisms of the 1990s in the same way that Noam Chomsky and Richard Barnet became anachronisms a decade before.

John Ehrman wants to maintain that neoconservatism is still thriving, only with the names and publications changed. That is not an absurd proposition, but it sacrifices what was unique about neoconservatism in order to preserve a sense of historical continuity between the Cold War and its aftermath. He would have done better to frame his book not as a study of the rise of neoconservatism, but of its rise and inevitable fall.

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