



Neoconservatives vs. Conservatives: Who Are the Real “Extremists”?

Although this is not something of which readers of this site need to be informed, it is a point worth repeating nonetheless.

Few and far between are those neoconservatives who refer to themselves as such. Usually, neoconservatives identify themselves as “conservative.” But because the neoconservative’s is the face and voice of one of our two national political parties, his refusal to come to terms with his true identity means that in the popular American consciousness, the neoconservative ideology is confused with conservatism proper.

However, traditional or classical conservatism, the conservatism of which [Edmund Burke](#) is among the most notable and impassioned representatives, is not only distinct from neoconservatism; it is diametrically opposed to it.



Neoconservatism is but the most recent species of what most students of political philosophy now call “[Enlightenment liberal rationalism](#).” That this is so is easily gotten from the causes that the neoconservative is disposed to support, especially the cause of “[Global Democracy](#)” — the enterprise of toppling regimes throughout the Middle East and beyond for the sake of establishing “democratic” governments in their wake.

This project, it is crucial to recognize, presupposes faith in a considerably robust metaphysical scheme, a philosophical vision laden with assumptions regarding reason and morality that are even more controversial today than they were during the Enlightenment when they initially took wing.

On this account, reason is a unitary phenomenon whose capacity to supply “solutions” to the world’s problems is potentially unlimited. To realize this potential, to achieve infallibility, rational agents only have to strictly observe those relatively few fundamental principles of which reason consists. As for what these principles are, rationalists have differed among themselves. [Descartes](#), for example, thought that as long as we didn’t grasp for that which we didn’t conceive “clearly and distinctly” — as long as the will didn’t attempt to trespass the limits that reason imposed upon it — we could never go wrong. Others, like William [Godwin](#), held that beliefs that were the fruits of prejudice, prescription, desire, custom, tradition, and, in short, any and every source that managed to escape *the tribunal* of the unencumbered Intellect, were species of irrationality to be stamped out. But what all rationalists seemed to share in common is the conviction that there existed one and the same rational power for all, a single standard by which all peoples in all places and at all times could be judged.

It is this belief, many now recognize, that was enlisted in the service of the colonial and imperial



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enterprises upon which European peoples embarked during just that period when the conception of omnipotent Reason was at its zenith. Blind to the culturally-specific character of what he took to be [a universal understanding of Reason](#), European Man assumed that because most of the world's inhabitants in places such as Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas failed to satisfy *his* canons of rationality, they weren't rational *as such*. In spite of the frequency with which it is repeated, the notion that whites at this time viewed non-whites as non-persons is incorrect. Rather, failing to see his own image in this socially and historically particular conception of reason that he identified with Reason itself, European or Western man regarded the non-white peoples of the world, not literally as non-persons, but as potential persons who could actualize all of the potentialities of which their circumstances permitted *only if* their wills were made subservient to his.

Sensibilities have changed dramatically since the nineteenth century, of course, but the neoconservative is located squarely within this imperialist tradition. Not only does he endorse its metaphysical (rationalist) underpinnings; the neoconservative, like his ancestors, actually aspires to impose a peculiarly Western system of institutional arrangements upon foreign peoples who, as far as he must be concerned, lack either the will or the capability to govern themselves in a manner that is both morally and rationally defensible.

Long ago the left embarked upon a campaign to depict all non-leftists—namely, conservatives and libertarians—as “kooks,” “racists,” “anti-Semites,” “xenophobes”—in short, *extremists*. The neoconservative, always on the hunt for strategies by which to establish his own respectability or, what amounts to the same thing in this day and age, endear himself to the left, decided to reinforce this image of the traditional rightist. This explains why he never spares an occasion to marginalize and denigrate those to his right (think of the treatment to which Ron Paul and Pat Buchanan are routinely subjected).

Interestingly, however, real conservatives — those who derive inspiration from (among others) Burke — resolutely reject the grandiose philosophy underwriting the neoconservative's ambitions for remaking the Middle East (and the world?) in the image of his view of “Democracy.” Not coincidentally, they just as emphatically reject his ambitions.

Reason, conservatives from *at least* the time of Burke have insisted, is inseparable from *tradition*. That is to say, far from being the monolithic power that neoconservatives and other rationalists envision, rationality can and has been conceived in a multiplicity of ways. And since each conception varies with cultural and historical circumstances — habits and customs — what this in turn means is that rationality is a thing *local* and *concrete* — not *universal* and *abstract*.

Due to their tradition-centered understanding of reason and knowledge, conservatives — even during the height of the Enlightenment — have been, at the very least, reluctant to lend their support to enterprises designed to erode the traditions and customs of foreign peoples in order to *coerce* them into acquiescing in Western or Eurocentric ideals.

But in spite of these enormous differences between neoconservatives and classical conservatives, two distinct but inseparable injustices persist. First, neoconservatives are now known as “conservatives” and conservatives, if they are known at all, are known as the “extremists” that neoconservatives continue to characterize them as being. Second, it is *the conservative*, not the neoconservative, who is known as the extremist.

Although I think name calling, even when the names are fashionable politically correct buzzwords, is



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not productive of civil and rational discourse, perhaps it is time for those on the traditional right to begin letting people know who *the real* extremists are.



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