



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 3, 2012

Obama and the “National Greatness” Neoconservatives

Long before he reached the White House, Barack Obama made clear he was not against all wars, just “dumb wars.” He opposed the Iraq war from the start, but the withdrawal of American combat troops late last year was accomplished in spite of, not because of, his efforts. The Iraqi government refused the Obama administration’s request for an extension of the December 31, 2011 deadline for the end of the U.S. occupation under the Status of Force Agreement our two nations had signed while Bush was in office. Obama has begun a withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan that is supposed to be completed by 2014, but he also increased the number of attacks by unmanned bombers in neighboring Pakistan and in other parts of the Middle East.



Last week in his State Of the Union address, Obama, who never served in the military, held up military service as the template for the nation’s political life. Opening his address with praise for the “courage, selflessness, and teamwork of America’s armed forces,” the President went on to say: “They’re not consumed with personal ambition. They don’t obsess over their differences. They focus on the mission at hand. They work together. Imagine what we could accomplish if we followed their example.”

And then imagine whom Obama is positioning as the one to define the “mission at hand,” while summoning the members of Congress to “work together,” marching in unison under his command. He returned to that theme at the end of his speech.

“Those of us who’ve been sent here to serve can learn a thing or two from the service of our troops. When you put on that uniform, it doesn’t matter if you’re black or white; Asian, Latino, Native American; conservative, liberal; rich, poor; gay, straight. When you’re marching into battle, you look out for the person next to you, or the mission fails. When you’re in the thick of the fight, you rise or fall as one unit, serving one nation, leaving no one behind.”

Can the President and the Congress “rise or fall as one unit”? Should they? Sure, we send them to Washington to solve programs, but we also expect them to fight for their competing ideas about possible solutions, fight for opposing principles and pursue their different objectives. Our government was not designed to act as one harmonious unit, “one for all and all for one,” but as a collection of competing interests, acting against one another in a system of reciprocal checks on political power. That’s why we have a government neither of one man nor one party. That’s why we have elections, even within the parties. When Ohio Congressman John Ashbrook challenged President Richard Nixon in the Republican presidential primaries of 1972, some party leaders accused him of not being “a team player.” Ashbrook’s response was that if unity were the only principal important to the party, we might as well “join the mafia.” Or we could join the army of Obama’s vain imagining.



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It must have struck at least some members of Congress as a bit ironic to hear a lecture about obsession with “personal ambition” from a man whose own considerable ambition took him from the Illinois state Senate to the Oval Office in just four years. And, of course, all the talk of setting aside personal ambition and acting like an army serves Obama’s own ambition and that of others who would like to have a society marching in lockstep. One of the hazards faced by free people whose nation is perpetually at war is the temptation for those in power to try to reshape society along military — which is to say authoritarian — lines. War tends to accumulate power in the government, particularly in the executive branch. “The constitution supposes, what the History of all Governments demonstrates,” wrote James Madison, “that the Executive is the branch of power most interested in war, and most prone to it.”

Obama is hardly alone in his desire to see civil society conform to the martial virtues. His 2008 opponent, Sen. John McCain, had already written his prescription for the “spiritual crisis in our national culture.” In an article he penned for the *Washington Monthly* shortly after 9/11, McCain offered high praise for City Year, an AmeriCorps program doing public service work in several cities. “City Year members wear uniforms, work in teams, learn public speaking skills, and gather together for daily calisthenics, often in highly public places such as in front of city hall,” wrote McCain, who also endorsed the National Civilian Community Corps, “a service program consciously structured along military lines.” Members “not only wear uniforms and work in teams... but actually live together in barracks on former military bases.” McCain called for expanding both programs in order to spread their “group-cohesion techniques” to other AmeriCorps activities. As Gene Healey of the [Cato Institute](#) observed, “‘Group cohesion’ and calisthenics in front of city hall reflect a version of patriotism, to be sure, albeit one that seems more North Korean than American.”

McCain in 2000 and 2008 was the favorite presidential candidate of a group of neoconservative intellectuals who espoused a “national greatness” conservatism. In 1997, [David Brooks](#), then with [The Weekly Standard](#), published an essay in that magazine titled “A Return to National Greatness: A Manifesto for a Lost Creed.” In it, Brooks waxed nostalgic not only for the “energetic government” of Teddy Roosevelt that gave us the Panama Canal and the national parks, but also for Wilson’s Fourteen Points, FDR’s New Deal, and Kennedy’s New Frontier. With the Depression, World War II, and even the Cold War behind us, Brooks and other big thinkers of the 1990s worried that with no great national mission to accomplish, Americans would become lost in what Brooks called “the petty concerns of bourgeois life.”

A year earlier, *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol and Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, co-authored an article in *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship publication of the Council on Foreign Relations. In what might seem a touch ironic now, the pair scorned those “more interested in balancing the budget than in leading the world.” America, they said, should use its great power to pursue a “benevolent global hegemony.”

Then came 9/11, the War on Terror, and President George W. Bush’s pledge to the “rid the world of evildoers,” a mission grand enough to please the apostles of “national greatness.” Worries that our political establishment was overly concerned about balancing the budget marvelously disappeared. But does America really need an armed crusade or a quasi-military national domestic corps to have a sense of national purpose?

[George Washington in his Farewell Address](#) described a national purpose in terms that are still applicable today. Washington spoke of “preserving the sacred fire of liberty.” He urged his countrymen



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to be on guard against “foreign influence and corruption,” to steer clear of “permanent alliances” and “overgrown military establishments,” which are “particularly hostile to republican liberty.” Washington’s prayerful wish was that the Constitution be “sacredly maintained ... that the happiness of the people of these States, under the auspices of liberty, may be made complete by so careful a preservation, and so prudent a use of this blessing, as will acquire to them the glory of recommending it to the applause, the affection and adoption of every nation which is yet a stranger to it.”

Washington’s vision of greatness for America lay not in a dream of a militarized society in “the homeland” or the pursuit of conquest, occupation, and nation-building around the world. The “mission at hand’ our first President set forth was to promote American values of liberty and justice in the world by living up to them, both at home and abroad. It is, if we accept it, an ongoing mission, not a “mission accomplished.”



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