



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on January 5, 2009

Is Conservatism Dead?

The Republican party suffered an overwhelming electoral defeat this past November. The establishment media were all too quick to proclaim that conservatism is dead and we're now at the dawn of a liberal age. Peter Beinart, Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy for the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), wrote in *Time* magazine that we are facing the dawn of a "new liberal order."



In making this proclamation, Beinart overlooks the fact that the public was not voting *for* President-elect Obama, but rather *against* Republicans like John McCain and George W. Bush. But what was it that Bush and the Republican Party have come to symbolize? Bush and McCain both stood for an activist foreign policy of globally spreading democracy, never-ending commitments of nation building, open borders at home, record deficit spending, circumventing the Constitution, expanding domestic welfare programs, and nationalizing the financial sector.

Conservative South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford wrote in a CNN commentary that "Republicans have campaigned on the conservative themes of lower taxes, less government and more freedom — they just haven't governed that way. America didn't turn away from conservatism, they turned away from many who faked it."

Constitution Party candidate Chuck Baldwin wrote, "For all intents and purposes, conservatism — as a national movement — is completely and thoroughly dead. Barack Obama did not destroy it, however. It was George W. Bush and John McCain who destroyed conservatism in America."

David Boaz of the libertarian CATO Institute explains that Bush "delivered massive overspending, the biggest expansion of entitlements in 40 years, centralization of education, a floundering war, an imperial presidency, civil liberties abuses, ... and finally a \$700 billion bailout of Wall Street that just kept on growing in the last month of the campaign. Voters who believed in limited government had every reason to reject that record."

These modern Republican policies have nothing to do with traditional conservatism, but have much more in common with big-government liberalism. So how did politicians claiming to be conservatives end up acting like big-government liberals? The explanation lies in understanding the rise of neoconservatism, which has come to define modern conservatism and the GOP.



Modern American Conservatism

The modern American conservative movement is considered to have begun in 1953 with the publishing of *The Conservative Mind* by Russell Kirk. With this book, Kirk traced the evolution of the conservative ideology from the American founding to the early 20th century. Conservatism, Kirk proclaimed, was based on the core principles of "an enduring moral order, the Constitution of the United States, established American way of life, and a free economy." Conservatism, as Kirk and similar traditionalists of his day saw it, meant an adherence to the Constitution and a mind-our-own-business foreign policy. These conservatives were opposed to an activist foreign policy, weary of executive power, and hesitant to engage in war. Kirk praised the late Senator Robert A. Taft for his ability to recognize that "war was the enemy of Constitution, liberty, economic security, and the cake of custom."

Conservative ideology developed and morphed through the years. It had internal conflicts between Rockefeller Republicans, followers of Nelson Rockefeller who held liberal views, and Goldwater conservatives, supporters of Barry Goldwater who adhered to a strict interpretation of the Constitution. This struggle went back and forth, with the liberal wing electing Richard Nixon and the conservative wing electing Ronald Reagan. Over this period, the liberal wing began to gain more power within the establishment right centered inside our nation's capital beltway. It wasn't until the 1970s when the neoconservatives (neocons for short) joined the conservative movement with their own distinct radical beliefs involving a hyper-interventionist foreign policy. Their influence within the movement would grow through the following decades, eventually culminating in George W. Bush's administration.

Neocons as Big-government Globalists

So what is it neocons believe in? Neocons are not concerned with reducing the size of government and are actually quite content with it getting bigger. Justin Raimondo, author of *Reclaiming the American Right: The Lost Legacy of the Conservative Movement* (the book that inspired Ron Paul to run for president), writes, "On the domestic front, far from opposing the growth of Big Government, or even seeking to slow it down, the neocons want to utilize the centralizing federal apparatus to achieve their own 'conservative' ends."

President Bush exemplified this big-government conservatism more than any other modern Republican. Fred Barnes, the author of the pro-Bush *Rebel in Chief*, explains that "big government conservatives are favorably disposed toward what neoconservative Irving Kristol has called a 'conservative welfare state.' (Neocons tend to be big government conservatives.) ... Bush has never put a name on his political philosophy, though he once joked that it was based on the premise that you could fool some of the people all of the time and he intended to concentrate on those people." Keep in mind that Barnes is actually speaking favorably about Bush. He highlights the misplaced priorities between traditional conservatives and neocons.

While big-government programs might be part and parcel of neocon agendas, it is foreign policy that is at the heart of their ideology. Max Boot, another admitted neocon and CFR senior fellow, explains: "It is not really domestic policy that defines neoconservatism. This was a movement founded on foreign policy, and it is still here that neoconservatism carries the greatest meaning." Boot contends that America should be the world's policeman.

This foreign policy is far from the noninterventionist one recommended by America's Founders of avoiding entangling alliances and pursuing peace and commerce. Instead, it is an aggressive, costly and dangerous policy of America policing the globe in order to establish a new democratic order without



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regard to any U.S. national interest. Of course, constant war goes hand in hand with this scenario. Raimondo writes, "Indeed, warmongering is the very essence of neoconservatism."

Neocons' Leftist Origins

Neocons were former liberal war hawks, many of whom were intellectuals, who felt disenfranchised by the Democratic Party's embrace of the peace movement. The neocons decided to jump ship and join with the Republicans, in whom they felt they would have a more receptive audience for their internationalist agenda. They were welcomed with open arms by the Rockefeller Republicans and other members of the beltway right. Traditional conservatives were not enthused by these new arrivals, but they felt that a new group of intellectuals would add gravitas to the movement.

Neoconservative thought represents an ideology with more similarities to Trotskyite communism than traditional American conservatism. Writing in the *Weekly Standard*, Irving Kristol, who is widely considered to be the godfather of neocons, freely admitted that neoconservatism originated "from disillusioned liberal intellectuals in the 1970s." Kristol himself is an admitted former Trotskyite. Trotskyism is the theory of Marxism named after Leon Trotsky, who strongly supported an international socialist revolution and asserted that socialism could only come into being on a global scale. Kristol was the managing editor of *Commentary Magazine* from 1947 to 1952, which is referred to as the neocon bible. Kristol is also the father of William Kristol, founder of the *Weekly Standard*. William Kristol, part of the second generation of neocons, is considered to be one of the leading voices of the movement.

Neocon Michael Ledeen, contributing editor for *National Review*, explained his leftist roots in an interview and said, "I describe myself as a democratic revolutionary, I don't think of myself as 'conservative' at all."

In the book *Where the Right Went Wrong: How Neoconservatives Subverted the Reagan Revolution and Hijacked the Bush Presidency*, Pat Buchanan explains:

The first generation were ex-Trotskyites, socialists, leftists and liberals who backed FDR, Truman, JFK and LBJ. When the Democratic Party was captured by McGovern in 1972 — on a platform of cutting defense and 'Come Home America!' — these Cold War liberals found themselves isolated and ignored in their own party. Adrift, they ran over to the Republican Party and were pulled aboard as conservatism's long voyage was culminating in the triumph of Reagan.

The Rise of the Neocons

Many neocons played important supporting roles in the Reagan administration. Neocons appointed by Reagan include William Bennett, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Richard Perle, Eugene Rostow, Carnes Lord, and Elliott Abrams. This is not to say that neocons ran the administration. As a matter of fact, the neocons had many differences of opinion with President Reagan about foreign policy. Neocon Norman Podhoretz, editor-at-large for *Commentary Magazine*, then wrote an essay entitled "The Neoconservative Anguish Over Reagan's Foreign Policy."

The neocons were considered a helpful constituency in the conservative movement at the time, but they were just one constituency in a much larger movement. The neocons were not content with this arrangement and had hoped that they would gain more power in George H.W. Bush's administration. William Kristol served as chief of staff to Vice President Dan Quayle and expressed optimism about neocon leadership of the first Bush White House.

Russell Kirk, still highly regarded in conservative circles at the time, expressed reservations about



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neocon leadership. Kirk was wary of the way neocons had "been rash in their schemes of action, pursuing a fanciful democratic globalism rather than the national interest of the United States." He also did not believe that George H.W. Bush would give in to neocon pressure. Kirk said, "It is a reasonable presumption that Mr. Kristol and certain of his colleagues would prefer to install in the White House some person, not at all a fine gentleman, who might be deviously manipulated by neoconservative ideologues. Mr. Bush has far too much practical experience of federal office to be so managed by the 'first-class academic "brain trust" ' that Mr. Kristol desires to establish in the White House." Apparently, Kirk overestimated George H.W. Bush and did not even consider the future ascendancy of his son who would turn out to be "open to devious manipulation" by the neocons.

The neocons were elated with the advent of the first Gulf War as the elder Bush assumed the role of the liberal internationalist they had been hoping for. Kirk would become extremely disillusioned with the president over the decision to intervene. Kirk chided the president for initially engaging in war for an "oil can," referring to the rationale of keeping open the Kuwaiti oil fields, and he famously derided Bush for his eventual explanation for going to war: to launch a "New World Order." "What are we to say of Mr. Bush's present endeavor to bring to pass a gentler, kinder New World Order? Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson were enthusiasts for American domination of the world. Now George Bush appears to be emulating those eminent Democrats. When the Republicans, once upon a time, nominated for the presidency a 'One World' candidate, Wendell Willkie, they were sadly trounced. In general, Republicans throughout the twentieth century have been advocates of prudence and restraint in the conduct of foreign affairs." Kirk was so upset with the Gulf War and the change in direction of the conservative movement that he wrote to a friend expressing his opinion that Bush should be strung up on the White House lawn for war crimes!

As always, neocons came down on the opposing side of Kirk's traditional conservatism. To them, it was not Bush's globalist intervention that betrayed the conservative movement, but it was his failure to fully complete the job of regime change in Iraq. The neocons grew disillusioned with the elder Bush for *not* being enough of a liberal interventionist. The neocons felt betrayed by the president's decision to leave Saddam in power. They spent most of the '90s establishing new publications and think tanks to promote their viewpoints. The neocons also made a conscientious effort to more closely influence powerful GOP politicians like Newt Gingrich and John McCain. The neocons also worked to increase their influence with the right-wing media. Media personalities like Rush Limbaugh became closely aligned with top neocon thinkers. The flagship magazine of the beltway right, *National Review*, purged traditional conservatives in favor of neocon-approved GOP partisans.

You could say the neocons never met a foreign intervention they didn't like. They praised the Clinton administration whenever it took any globalist action but then criticized it for not going far enough. The neocons were fervent supporters of Clinton's efforts to expand NATO. They applauded the bombing of Belgrade but decried the lack of ground troops. In 1997, William Kristol and Robert Kagan, a CFR neocon and contributing editor to *The New Republic*, co-founded the Project for a New American Century (PNAC). PNAC is a neoconservative think tank that promotes higher military spending and an increased role for America as a global policeman. In 1998, PNAC issued a letter to President Clinton urging regime change in Iraq. Even though Clinton pushed deadly sanctions against Iraq and continual bombing raids, the Monica Lewinsky scandal made it politically difficult to fully implement PNAC's policy recommendations. The neocons wouldn't have to wait long before a politically viable reality for Iraq regime change developed.



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Neocons Finally Dominate

It was in the administration of George W. Bush that neocons finally came to fully occupy the driver's seat. The 9/11 terrorist attacks gave the neocons the opportunity to push their long-held view of a global democratic revolution to the mainstream. Was George W. Bush a neocon? If he wasn't, he did one great impression. Some neocons feel that Bush was a true believer. Neocon Richard Perle has said of Bush: "The President of the United States, on issue after issue, has reflected the thinking of neoconservatives." The neocons got almost everything they wanted from Bush, most importantly the Iraq invasion.

Bush appointed many neocons to his administration, and he didn't hide the fact that he employed many neoconservatives. While giving a speech at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), an influential Washington think tank founded in 1943 and known as the headquarters of neoconservative thought, President Bush told the audience, "You do such good work that my administration has borrowed 20 such minds."

Even with all the obvious failures of the Bush administration, the Republican faithful still continued their disastrous love affair with the neocons by picking McCain as their 2008 presidential candidate. John McCain's close relationship with the neocons dated back to the '90s when they both broke ranks with the GOP to support the intervention in Kosovo. McCain also had many prominent neocons advising his campaign. When it came to foreign policy, McCain used all the neocon talking points on the campaign trail. McCain's foreign policy positions seem like they were lifted straight off PNAC's website.

Now the neocons are blaming everyone but themselves for McCain's defeat, and they are making suggestions that have little to do with the reality of the voter rejection of the GOP. David Frum, the neocon speechwriter for Bush who coined the term "Axis of Evil," claimed that picking social conservative Sarah Palin was the reason for the loss and recommends that the GOP should lessen its opposition to abortion and gay "marriage." Frum says this despite the fact that exit polling showed that McCain might have lost by an even larger margin without Palin to draw in social conservatives. William Kristol claimed that Bush was too laissez faire and the GOP needs to become more interventionist on economic policy. Kristol says this despite the fact that Bush was nowhere close to laissez faire and employed an interventionist economic policy throughout his years in office. Bush himself seems out of touch with reality. In an interview with Charles Gibson, he explained that the biggest disappointment was not the neocon foreign policy but, rather, the failure to crowbar amnesty for illegal immigrants through Congress! He also said that the landslide November defeat was not because of him but because of voter dissatisfaction with the Republican Party. And why were they dissatisfied? Bush did not explain.

Post-neocon Conservative Movement?

What will be the future of the post-Bush conservative movement? It is tempting to heap all the blame on the neocons as an aberration in the conservative movement, but the troubles run deeper than that. Neocons have so completely infiltrated the conservative movement that it's hard to distinguish between true neocons and establishment conservatives. Most of the Republicans who supported the Iraq invasion were not Trotskyite fellow travelers but rather knee-jerk partisans who were all too willing to accept the neocon consensus trumpeted by party leaders and the beltway right media of Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh.

Individuals who consider themselves traditional conservatives should reject the voices of both GOP party leaders and members of the media who promoted Bush's brand of conservatism. Instead they



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should listen to the voices of constitutional conservatives who stood by principle over party in opposition to Iraq and other unconstitutional actions by the big-government Bush administration. Voices like Ron Paul, Pat Buchanan, Charles Goyette, and organizations like the John Birch Society as well as *The New American* magazine.

The mainstream media (MSM) also played a role in assisting the neocons dominating the GOP. Big-government conservatives who are close with the neocons, like Lindsey Graham and John McCain, are praised as pragmatic centrists and moderates by the establishment media, whereas true constitutionalists and traditional conservatives like Ron Paul or Pat Buchanan are considered extreme or fringe and are ignored altogether. The MSM is all too eager to employ a neocon as their organization's in-house conservative, thereby redefining conservatism as neoconservatism. Bill Kristol became an op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* in January 2008 even though almost all of his Iraq predictions proved false. Jon Stewart even kidded with him, asking, "Oh, Bill Kristol, are you ever right?" It is far past time to reject this media-concocted paradigm and expose the true extremists: those who would indebt future generations and pursue dangerous and unconstitutional policies of endless war.

If conservatives continue to identify with the failed Bush policies, then the conservative movement is dead as we know it. On the other hand, if true traditional conservatives, following in the footsteps of Russell Kirk or Ron Paul or Pat Buchanan, acknowledge the failures of Bush and the neocons while renewing their dedication to the U.S. Constitution, the conservative movement's obituary might be premature. As for many of the knee-jerk GOP partisans who became staunch supporters of the neocons? They'll quickly fall in line with the new constitutional coalition just like they did with Bush and the Iraq War.

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