



Neocon Invasion

In the last two weeks of February this year, American conservatives were shocked to see the vicious onslaught the media mounted against Pat Buchanan and his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Even with all the distortion that conservatives have come to expect from the liberal biases of the newspaper and broadcast industries, the attacks on Buchanan seemed to go well beyond what most could remember or imagine. Major newspapers, magazines, and columnists all piled on Buchanan to insinuate or claim outright that he is a “fascist,” an “extremist,” a “Nazi,” a “racist,” an “anti-Semite,” a “xenophobe,” a “sexist,” a “homophobe,” and a “nativist,” not to mention half a dozen other epithets typical of left-wing demonology.

A Closer Look

But, looking more closely at the media blitzkrieg against Buchanan, it became clear that the left was not the only political force involved in the smears. A good deal of the most hostile criticism of Buchanan came not from the left but from the right — or at least from figures who claim to be on the right. While some of Buchanan’s conservative critics expressed legitimate disagreements with some of his positions on foreign trade and economics, much of the most bitter hostility was nearly indistinguishable from what came from the left.

In fact, those on the “right” who led the charge in denouncing Buchanan and leveling some of the most vicious accusations against him emerged from the ranks of what is generally called “neoconservatism.” This is a label that began to appear in the late 1960s for a grouping that is distinct from both the liberal-left side of the political spectrum as well as from the “Old Right” or what is sometimes called the “paleoconservative” side. Buchanan, however, was by no means the first conservative victim of neoconservative attacks, and those on the right who have followed the controversies between “neos” and “paleos” over the last 15 years were not surprised at the leading role the neoconservatives played in the campaign against him. Conservatives who favor Buchanan and the general platform on which he ran need to be informed about what neoconservatives really stand for.

Neoconservatism as a distinct identity began to appear in the late 1960s, when several Establishment liberals and leftists started expressing concern about the radical direction their ideological colleagues were taking over issues such as the Vietnam War, American foreign policy in general, and many domestic matters. The leaders of what soon came to be known as “neoconservatism” regarded themselves as “liberal anti-communists” who favored a policy of containment in Vietnam and who were repelled by the pro-communist apologetics voiced by the New Left. They were also alarmed by what they regarded as the “isolationism” expressed by the New Left as well as by the favor the New Left harbored for many anti-American, anti-Western Third World movements (which often enjoyed Soviet support) such as the Palestine Liberation Organization, the African National Congress, and the Nicaraguan Sandinistas.

Domestically, many of the evolving neoconservatives also expressed reservations about the spreading pornography, homosexuality, drugs, crime, and “permissiveness” that began to flourish with LBJ’s “Great Society,” the legacy of the Warren Court, and the emergence of a drug-and-sex-obsessed “counterculture” in the ’60s, and they generally defended the authority and legitimacy of traditional morality, religion, and American and Western forms of government.

Old Right Acceptance



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Centered around such journals as *Commentary* and *The Public Interest* under the editorship, respectively, of liberal intellectuals Norman Podhoretz and Irving Kristol, the neoconservatives were welcomed by almost all mainstream conservatives of the Old Right, who for some time had been voicing many of the same thoughts about the direction of the United States and its government and culture in the late 1960s. The neoconservatives had long histories of publishing their articles in prestigious Establishment journals and magazines; some of them had impressive academic credentials and powerful contacts in academic, political, and media circles; and as dissident liberals they were able to express criticisms of the New Left that other liberals would take more seriously than if the same ideas were pronounced by known conservatives. In the 1970s there was every reason to believe that even if the small but growing number of neoconservative intellectuals could not embrace all of the old conservative agenda, they would be valuable allies of the right in resisting the extreme Left.

By the eve of the Reagan administration, neoconservatives were generally welcomed into conservative circles, and their ideas began winning acceptance as “respectable,” “credible,” “results-oriented” expressions of conservatism. But it was not long before old conservatives began to perceive that they would have to pay a price for their new allies.

Despite their dislike of the New Left, their anti-communism, and their concern about destructive cultural and moral trends, the neoconservatives for the most part never quite managed to break completely with many of the underlying liberal assumptions. In one of the earliest exchanges between neoconservatives and paleoconservatives in *National Review* in 1972, the late James Burnham, himself a former Trotskyite communist who had evolved toward genuine conservatism, remarked that while the intellectuals who espoused neoconservatism might have broken formally with “liberal doctrine,” they nevertheless retained in their thinking “what might be called the emotional gestalt of liberalism, the liberal sensitivity and temperament.” In other words, even though neoconservatives no longer consciously believed in many liberal ideas, they still showed the habits of thought and the emotional reactions to those ideas.

Thus, while neoconservatives despised the New Left, they continued to embrace an unexamined liberal faith in the big government created by liberals from Woodrow Wilson through Franklin Roosevelt to John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Several of them — such as Ben Wattenberg, Elliott Abrams, and Penn Kemble — came out of the ranks of democratic socialism and its commitment to organized labor. Even though they criticized various aspects of the welfare state, they continued to believe a welfare state was both legitimate and inevitable. Irving Kristol himself writes in his *Reflections of a Neo-Conservative* that “a conservative welfare state ... is perfectly consistent with the neo-conservative perspective.”

In foreign policy, though the neoconservatives were anti-communist, they focused mainly on the Soviet Union rather than on China or internal domestic subversion, and they continued to regard “McCarthyism” — the legitimate and necessary investigation of domestic subversion — as an evil. They also favored a foreign policy that, while anti-communist, centered around what came to be called “exporting democracy” — that is, using American power to undermine right-wing anti-communist governments that were less than liberal or democratic, and fostering their replacement by “democratic” governments that were often simply democratic socialist in orientation. 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.



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Old conservatives who welcomed the neocons into their ranks soon found that their new allies often displayed the habit of telling them what was and what was not “permissible” to say and how to say it. Criticism of the New Left and domestic communism was fine, but what the neoconservatives regarded as “McCarthyism” — calling for restoration of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, for example, or the FBI’s domestic security functions — was not respectable. Criticizing affirmative action was also okay, but criticism of unconstitutional civil rights legislation, the civil rights movement, or Martin Luther King Jr. was not respectable. Old conservative heroes like Joseph McCarthy, Douglas MacArthur, Charles Lindbergh, Robert Taft, and even Barry Goldwater tended to disappear or earn scorn in neoconservative journals, while Harry Truman, George Marshall, Hubert Humphrey, and Henry Jackson developed into idols before which conservatives were supposed to bend the knee. Almost none of the neoconservatives showed any interest in American constitutional principles or federalist and states’ rights issues and arguments based on constitutionalism were muted in favor of the “empirical” arguments drawn from disciplines like sociology and political science in which neoconservative academics tended to concentrate.

Positions of Power

The tendencies of neoconservatives to dictate to older conservatives what they could and could not say, write, and argue might not have been taken very seriously had the neoconservatives not succeeded in insinuating themselves into powerful positions within conservative organizations and publications. Midge Decter, wife of the neoconservative editor of *Commentary* magazine Norman Podhoretz and a leading neoconservative writer herself, was appointed to the Board of Trustees of the Heritage Foundation, and neoconservative writers and editors began popping up in the pages and on the mastheads of mainstream conservative publications. By the end of the Reagan administration, neoconservatives had become dominant or extremely influential in a number of such conservative groups. Not only at *Commentary* and *The Public Interest*, but also at *National Review*, *The American Spectator*, and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial pages, as well as at the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and other leading conservative think-tanks, neoconservative influence became routine.

Neoconservatives also began taking over the tax-exempt foundations that had provided funding for most of the conservative organizations. These foundations, smaller than the Establishment liberal giants like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, had been established by wealthy conservative families to serve philanthropic goals. But in the 1980s neoconservatives succeeded in taking over many of their administrative functions, using their positions to re-direct the funds which the foundations dispensed — turning off the spigot to conservative groups they deemed not “credible” and turning it on for those they favored.

One mechanism for neoconservative control of conservative funding was an organization called the Philanthropic Roundtable, established in 1987 by neoconservative Leslie Lenkowsky. Lenkowsky explained that the Roundtable sought to “encourage foundations to think more about how they can achieve their objectives and to look more closely at what the groups they support really are accomplishing.” He warned that that meant not automatically funding “any organization with the word ‘liberty’ or ‘conservative’ in its name.”

The real purpose of the Philanthropic Roundtable seems to be to “police” the funding of conservative groups by foundations under neoconservative influence, to make certain that conservative groups of which the neoconservatives disapprove do not receive donations, and to direct funds to those groups



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they favor, usually those controlled by their own allies. Old conservative activists have privately complained of being denied funding or having their funds cut if they did not meet with neoconservative approbation, and donations awarded by foundations under neoconservative influence seem to reflect this pattern.

In his book *The Conservative Movement*, paleoconservative historian Paul Gottfried notes, “Neoconservative activists have largely succeeded in centralizing both the collection and distribution of funding from right-of-center philanthropies.” Neoconservatives like Lenkowsky and Michael Joyce, executive director of the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and chairman of the Philanthropic Roundtable, “have been gaining control over the form and content of movement conservatism.” Gottfried quotes another Old Rightist, James Taylor, president of the World Youth Crusade for Freedom, as one who “believes the Philanthropic Roundtable was never intended as a mere ‘clearinghouse.’ It was, from the outset, an ‘attempt by neocons to search out all conservative funds and direct them toward their own friends.’” Gottfried cites several Old Right organizations that “have all either been deemed unfit for funding at Roundtable discussions or repeatedly discouraged from applying for grants.”

The *National Journal* has called the Bradley Foundation, with \$420 million in assets, “the nation’s largest underwriter of conservative intellectual activity,” and Michael Joyce as its head exercises immense influence in directing the activities of the conservative movement. In 1987 Joyce remarked, “The terms ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ are not very precise, and if they have any contemporary meaning, it seems to me that they refer only to general and very relative political dispositions.” In 1993, he remarked, “I’m ... not ready to repeal the welfare state. I want to ameliorate the problems of the welfare state,” thus reflecting Irving Kristol’s endorsement of a “conservative welfare state” as “perfectly consistent with the neoconservative perspective.”

Perhaps the most notorious instance of a neoconservative effort to bend an Old Right organization to alter its positions was the virtual cut-off of funds to the Rockford Institute, which has remained one of the flagships of Old Right conservatism. In 1989, Richard John Neuhaus, a Rockford employee who had been a speech writer for Martin Luther King, Jr. and had later developed into a neoconservative, was fired by Rockford after an internal struggle. Though Rockford had been the recipient of large donations from neoconservative foundations, the institute soon found its money being cut off. Neuhaus and other neoconservatives falsely accused Rockford and its monthly journal, *Chronicles*, of “anti-Semitism” and “bigotry,” charges that neoconservatives are well known for lodging and which resemble similar accusations hurled against conservatism by the Left in the 1950s and ’60s. Rockford has survived and has continued to support an undiluted old conservatism, but it has had to develop new funding sources. It is interesting that similar smears of the John Birch Society as “anti-Semitic” were launched by the left in the 1960s and then repeated by conservative enemies of the Society.

An Earlier Attack

The smear campaign against Rockford resembled earlier campaigns directed against Old Right figures who had challenged or threatened neoconservative interests. One of those early campaigns was against the late M.E. Bradford, professor of English at the University of Dallas and a leading exponent of Old Right thought. In 1981, Bradford and his supporters sought his appointment as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in the Reagan administration. As a widely published scholar and thinker, Bradford had eminent credentials for the post, which controls the flow of federal money to scholarships in the humanities, and as a lifelong conservative he had materially assisted the



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Reagan campaign in Texas.

One of his rivals for the NEH chairmanship was a virtually unknown academic named William J. Bennett, then the director of the National Humanities Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Bennett held a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Texas, but was not a distinguished scholar, had published virtually nothing in his field, and had a liberal background in politics. Nevertheless, Bennett won the support of the neoconservatives for the position at the NEH.

Since Bennett lacked adequate academic and political credentials to win the post, his neoconservative supporters resorted to a smear campaign against Bradford, falsely claiming that he advocated slavery, had praised Adolf Hitler, and was a virulent racist. An anonymous document repeating these unfounded charges circulated in the White House for the purpose of frightening the administration into denying Bradford the appointment. Bradford had written several scholarly critiques of Abraham Lincoln, and these were dredged up, quoted out of context, and used to “discredit” him as an “extremist.” Eventually, despite the endorsement of Bradford by some 18 U.S. senators, including Senators Jesse Helms and John East from Bennett’s own state of North Carolina, Bennett received the NEH nomination and was later confirmed.

Bennett’s appointment was the beginning of a long career as a neoconservative spokesman that continues to this day. He would later serve as education secretary under Reagan and “drug czar” under George Bush. In both positions Bennett pushed anti-conservative policies. At the Education Department, which Reagan had vowed to abolish, Bennett expanded the size and cost of the department and set the stage for further federal intrusion into education policy. As drug czar, Bennett proposed an ambitious and dubiously constitutional plan that would have given him virtually monolithic power over almost every area of federal — and much state and local — authority. President Bush wisely rejected much of the Bennett plan, but the incompetent, brutal, and unconstitutional federal intrusion into local law enforcement of recent years originated under Bennett.

The smears conducted against Bradford were perhaps the first occasion in which neoconservatives had actually attacked a conservative, but a follow-up occurred in 1986 when a similar crusade was launched against *National Review* editor and syndicated columnist Joseph Sobran. Sobran had written several articles critical of the Israeli government and the leftist proclivities of the American Jewish community. The neoconservative response came in the form of a letter from Midge Decter to Sobran accusing him of being “little more than a crude and naked anti-Semite.” The letter was disseminated to several of the editors of the magazines and newspapers for which Sobran wrote, with the clear intention of intimidating the editors into ceasing to publish Sobran at all. Eventually, William F. Buckley, Jr. demoted Sobran as an editor of *National Review*, and to this day the smears continue against one of the country’s most talented and courageous conservative writers.

Much the same kind of attack was also mounted against the late Russell Kirk, one of the country’s most respected conservative thinkers, after he remarked in a speech at the Heritage Foundation in 1988 that “not seldom it has seemed as if some eminent neoconservatives mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States,” a wisecrack about the slavishly pro-Israel sympathies among neoconservatives. Again, Decter responded with a vitriolic denunciation of Kirk as an “anti-Semite.” In the 1980s and several times since, *Commentary* has published articles denouncing Old Right conservatives (including some who are Jewish) for their alleged “anti-Semitism.” The lodging of such reckless and serious accusations against conservatives by other purported conservatives always plays into the hands of the Left, which is then able to repeat the charges and claim conservative endorsement of them.

**The Neocon Standard**

It was no surprise, therefore, to Old Right conservatives to notice the kind of attacks directed against Pat Buchanan as his campaign gained strength in the Republican primaries this year. Norman Podhoretz published an article in the new neoconservative magazine *The Weekly Standard*, claiming once again that Buchanan is an “anti-Semite,” and neocon columnists Charles Krauthammer and George Will regurgitated similar charges.

The *Standard* itself is the most recent testimony to the neoconservatives’ seemingly invincible talent for attracting funding and support for their peculiar “conservatism.” Funded by publisher Rupert Murdoch to the tune \$10 million, the *Standard* is published and edited by William Kristol, son of Irving, who in the first issue endorsed “Rockefeller Republican” Colin Powell for president.

The executive editor of the *Standard* is Fred Barnes, formerly a senior editor of *The New Republic*, one of the nation’s major liberal journals. In 1990 Barnes coined the term “Big Government Conservative” as an approbative label for such Republicans as Newt Gingrich, Jack Kemp, Dan Quayle, and William Bennett, whose support for federal activism and centralization is “consistent with the neo-conservative perspective.”

In 1994, Kristol and Barnes supported an effort to remove language from the Republican Party platform condemning abortion, with Barnes arguing in *The New Republic* that the removal would “bring the party nearer to the public’s view.” Although the proposal was strongly opposed by grassroots pro-life activists, it won (at the time, at least) the support of several leaders of the Christian Right, including Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition. Reed has pushed the Christian Coalition much closer to the neoconservatives than most of the Coalition’s membership would probably like. According to a recent article in *The New Yorker* by liberal neocon watcher Sidney Blumenthal, Irving Kristol has invited Reed to attend editorial meetings at *The Public Interest*, a neocon domestic policy journal. Recently, the Christian Coalition officially opposed language in congressional immigration legislation that would have restricted “family reunification,” a policy which allows recent immigrants to import relatives and which is one of the main sources of mass legal immigration into the United States. Despite the makeup of the Christian Coalition’s membership, neoconservatives have largely succeeded in co-opting that organization too, via its national leadership, moving the Coalition’s orientation to the left.

Moving conservatism to the left and bringing it closer to prevalent (mainly liberal) public views is a vital element of the neoconservative agenda, replacing the Old Right’s objective of changing the prevalent view to one consistent with traditional American, constitutionalist views. John Podhoretz, deputy editor of *The Weekly Standard* and son of Norman and Midge, wrote in the *Washington Times* in 1987, “To be conservative in the 1970s [as a neoconservative] meant to conserve not only basic moral and political views, but also programs like the New Deal that had become part of the American political fabric. The conservative decision to stop warring against the New Deal was one of the most important developments in the mass acceptance of Ronald Reagan.” In other words, the fundamental aim of the neoconservatives is to work for “conservative” goals within the framework of the New Deal arrangement, to push for a conservatism that brings us “nearer to the public view” and which can gain “mass acceptance,” without challenging the basic framework or assumptions of the liberal regime.

These aims reflect what James Burnham meant when he referred to the neoconservatives’ retaining “the emotional gestalt of liberalism, the liberal sensitivity and temperament.” Any form of conservatism that does challenge the boundaries of established liberalism and its power structure is, in the neoconservative mind, “extremism” and shouldn’t be permitted. Obviously, what is wrong with this view



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of “conservatism” is that it leaves the entire liberal apparatus in place and refuses to challenge it or the ideology that justifies it. A “conservatism” that is content with these goals can never succeed in dismantling the oppressive, socially destructive, unconstitutional, and anti-American liberal power structure.

Survival of the Old Right

The current line of the neoconservatives is that their creed has actually become American conservatism, replacing what the Old Right has been defending throughout American history — especially since the New Deal era. But the Old Right still lives — at the Rockford Institute, the Ludwig von Mises Institute, the John Birch Society, and in the pages of such publications as *Chronicles*, *Southern Partisan*, and *The New American*.

The conservative cause also survives in the hearts and minds of the millions of Americans who supported Pat Buchanan this year. The real lesson of the 1996 Republican primaries is not that Pat Buchanan failed in his Old Right presidential campaign, but that he consistently came in second and that all of the candidates or prospective candidates whom the neoconservatives favored or supported — Jack Kemp, Bill Bennett, Dan Quayle, Phil Gramm, Lamar Alexander, Steve Forbes — either were unable to mobilize enough support to enter the race or wound up winning fewer votes than Buchanan. So much for “bringing the party nearer to the public’s view” and gaining “mass acceptance” for conservatism.

Whatever false or fashionable idols the neoconservatives may succeed in setting up, it seems unlikely that many Americans worship them now or will be disposed to worship them in the future, any more than most Americans have ever worshiped the false gods of liberalism from which the neoconservatives claim to have defected.



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