

Star-Spangled Banner: The Recurrence of American Neoconservatism and Military Interventions

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Irving Kristol, hailed as the godfather of neoconservatism, once quipped that neoconservatives were ‘liberals mugged by reality’. Neoconservatives today are once again being confronted with a harsh reality since their heyday during the Global War on Terror (GWot). The setbacks have been numerous: the winding down of American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan without achieving the envisaged stability post-invasion; the outright refusal to send more troops into Iraq and Syria to combat the Islamic State (IS);¹ even Russia’s recent takeover of the Crimea while America stood helplessly watching, which has been identified as the start of a “Second Cold War” by some analysts. The latter is perhaps the most stinging rebuke since neoconservatism first started off as a staunchly anti-communist ideology, with America’s ‘defeat’ of the Soviet bloc in the ‘First Cold War’ arguably neoconservatism’s greatest success. Neoconservatism seems to be down, but is it out for good? In this supposed age of American decline, what comes next for neoconservatism is still worth investigating. Reservations of whether the United States has truly lost its nerve, or whether American leadership is backpedaling due to two failed wars are undoubtedly worthy considerations for any serious observer of world politics.

Neoconservatism is a convoluted idea. According to Seymour Martin Lipset, ‘[n]eoconservatism, both as an ideological term and as a political grouping, is one of the most misunderstood concepts in the political lexicon’.² However, although naysayers doubting neoconservatism’s coherence abound, and disagreements over definitions prevalent even amongst neoconservatives themselves, it is possible to identify a core of concepts common to all neoconservatives.³ Francis Fukuyama, though having repudiated neoconservatism publicly in ‘The Neoconservative Moment’,⁴ identified four neoconservative principles of American

¹ President Barack Obama even remarked that this year (2015) was the ‘first Memorial Day in 14 years that the United States is not engaged in a major ground war’, quoted in “‘US Not Engaged in Major War’: Obama Memorial Day Remark Slammed”, *Reuters*, 26 May 2015, <http://rt.com/usa/261941-us-engaged-war-obama/> (accessed 27 May 2015).

² Seymour Martin Lipset, ‘Neoconservatism: Myth and Reality’, *Society* 25, Issue 5 (July/August 1988), 29.

³ Jacob Helibrunn, for example, claims that no one has ever succeeded in defining neoconservatism; see Jacob Helibrunn, *They Knew They were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 6; for a discussion on disagreements between neoconservatives, see Jonah Goldberg, “State of Confusion”, *National Review Online*, 16 May 2003, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/206921/state-confusion-jonah-goldberg> (accessed 24 May 2015); for discussions on the elements common to all neoconservatives, see Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1-18, and Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 1-14.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The Neoconservative Moment’, *The National Interest*, Summer 2004.

foreign policy: (1) a ‘belief that the internal character of regimes matter and that foreign policy must reflect the deepest values of liberal democratic societies’, (2) a ‘belief that American power has been and could be used for moral purposes’, (3) a ‘distrust of ambitious social engineering projects’, and (4) ‘skepticism about the legitimacy and effectiveness of international law and institutions to achieve either security or justice’.⁵ These tenets underpinned the Bush Doctrine, which consisted of the four essential pillars of (1) ‘the maintenance of American military primacy’; (2) ‘the embrace of preventive war as a supplement to traditional deterrence’; (3) the global War on Terror; and (4) democratisation, as a response to the 9/11 attacks.⁶ Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 as a direct riposte to the 9/11 attacks and Operation Iraqi Freedom to destroy Saddam Hussein’s ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and thence preventing the proliferation of such to terrorist groups were thus the second great act of the neoconservative movement. Examining the principles of neoconservatism and how it powered the Bush Doctrine, it is clear that neoconservatism has both ‘an idealist strand and a power strand’, leading John Mearsheimer to call neoconservatism ‘essentially Wilsonianism with teeth’: ‘Wilsonianism provides the idealism, an emphasis on military power provides the teeth’.⁷

This paper therefore argues that neoconservatism’s dialectic nature of idealism and power is a more accurate manifestation of *both* liberalism and (paleo)conservatism. Neoconservatism is more liberal than liberalism if its original meaning involving ‘an anti-statist philosophy, opposition to mercantilism and the alliance of throne and altar, support for economic and political freedoms, laissez-faire and civil liberties, as well as egalitarianism in Tocquevillian terms’⁸ is taken into consideration. As Dan Himmelfarb puts it, modern ‘liberals’ have:

[U]rsurped the liberal label, leaving real liberals to be designated neoconservatives. These so-called liberals are illiberal in many respects: insofar as they support quotas in employment and education, they reject the liberal ideal of a society indifferent to race, gender, and ethnicity; insofar as they are inhospitable to certain views . . . they show contempt for the liberal ideals of free speech and toleration of unpopular, heretical or minority opinion, and most important, insofar as they regard Communism as a lesser threat than anti-Communism, they betray an indifference to large-scale tyranny, the opposition to which once served as the very definition of liberalism.⁹

Hence, neoconservatives are arguably the genuine liberals if one held steadfast to the original liberal ideals of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*. Similarly, neoconservatism is also at the same time more faithfully conservative than paleoconservatism if the origins of conservatism are taken into account. Traditionally, conservatism developed in opposition to an external environment changed by ‘revolutionary’ ideas. For example, during the anti-monarchical French Revolution, the nobility were the conservatives. Conservatism is hence a ‘positional’ ideology and not an inherent ideology; and since American institutions are ‘liberal, popular, and democratic’, they can best be defended by those who believe in liberalism, popular

⁵ Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*, 48-49.

⁶ Mary Buckley and Robert Singh (eds.), ‘Introduction’ in *The Bush Doctrine and the War on Terrorism: Global Responses, Global Consequences* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 4.

⁷ John J Mearsheimer, ‘Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq War: Realism Versus Neo-Conservatism’, *openDemocracy*, 19 May 2005, https://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/morgenthau_2522.jsp (accessed 26 May 2015).

⁸ Lipset, ‘Neoconservatism’, 29.

⁹ Dan Himmelfarb, ‘Conservative Splits’ in *Conservatism in America since 1930: A Reader*, ed. Gregory L. Schneider (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 390.

control, and democratic government, and hence, the conservatives in America must be liberals.¹⁰ Thus, in this positional sense of conservatism, the tenets of neoconservatism hold more faithfully to America's traditions as compared to paleoconservatism, making neoconservatism the distinctive American conservative tradition.

Developing this line of thought further, since neoconservatism is more exemplary of both American liberalism and American conservatism, we further argue that neoconservatism is therefore more faithfully American. This 'Americanness' is consequently demonstrated by its inherently ambivalent strands of idealism and power, an aporia reflective of the American experience and indeed, the American identity. Recalling neoconservatism's principles highlighted above, intrinsic paradoxes can be determined within each as well as between these. For instance, the use of force for moral purposes, or oxymoronically advocating regime change and yet distrusting ambitious social engineering projects. Underlying these paradoxes, and paralleling Stewart Patrick's argument regarding American ambivalence towards multilateral institutions,¹¹ neoconservatism reflects two features of the American experience: exceptionalism and global dominance. In exceptionalism, neoconservatism emphasises the extraordinary founding liberal principles of America and furthermore, these tenets can only be achieved through America's global hegemony. However, both exceptionalism and global dominance are ambiguous and pulls in different directions; exceptionalism in the evangelising/safeguarding of American uniqueness and global dominance in the leadership/isolationist dilemma. Such ambivalence and aporia is fundamental to the American identity, perhaps most evident in the quintessential American novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Therein, the 'America Dream', an ideal of liberty, hard work and prosperity, is nonetheless a corrupted myth personified in Jay Gatsby who arose to wealth only through illegal and underhand means, whereas he had failed to do so in the only instance of meritocracy in the book, the army.¹² Thus, under the neoconservative persuasion, America is the top advocate of democracy, liberalism and human rights, and yet in the process, commits atrocities such as Abu Ghraib, and using military force to impose democracy in the Middle East. Such a peculiar trademark for well-intended heroism has been reflected in American history. Pick a case: the whipping of Iraq (1990) and then again (2003); the bombing of Libya (1986), and then the bombing of it once more (2011). Through a study of the recurring American military interventions since the Second World War¹³—the onset of American hegemony—this paper shows that neoconservatism hence truly embodies the American star-spangled banner; it may be battered, discredited, and out of style, but that does not mean it is out for good, and it can be expected to persist. American military intervention, even war, can hence be expected to be a constant in the international arena.

(1,193 words)

¹⁰ A positional ideology is defined as one which reflects the changing external environment of a group rather than its permanent internal characteristics; an inherent ideology is defined as a theoretical expression of the interests of a continuing social group; see Samuel Huntington, 'Conservatism as an Ideology', *The American Political Science Review* 51, no. 2 (1957), 467-468, and 472.

¹¹ Stewart Patrick, 'Multilateralism and Its Discontents: The Causes and Consequences of U.S. Ambivalence' in *Multilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy: Ambivalent Engagement*, eds. Stewart Patrick and Shepard Forman (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 1-44.

¹² See F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, reprint from 1925 (New York: Scribner, 2004).

¹³ See William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions since World War II* (London: Zed Books, 2003).