

Against Relativism

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Neoconservatism

Why We Need It

by Douglas Murray

Encounter, 200 pp., \$25.95

Never much admired in the academy, in literary circles, or among fashionable journalists since its emergence in the 1960s and '70s, neoconservatism in the post-9/11 world has, particularly in polite society, come into especially ill repute. For allegedly enabling George W. Bush to drag the nation into a misbegotten and catastrophically harmful war in Iraq, neoconservatives have been subject to relentless vilification. They are cowards, "chickenhawks," who clamor to send other people's children to fight and fall in faraway lands. They are illiberal and antidemocratic followers of Leo Strauss; in accordance with their master's teaching, they dream of, and may be perilously well advanced in establishing, a secret elite to rule the nation and, through the nation's empire, the world. And they flirt with dual loyalty by serving as spear carriers in America for the expansionist policies of Israel's right-wing Likud party.

Of course, anyone who enters the public square with the intention to influence public opinion must be prepared to endure criticism, unfair as well as fair. If you don't have a thick skin and a strong stomach, you shouldn't join the democratic fray. This is not to say that culpable ignorance, malicious distortion, and vulgar accusation should go unanswered. But in a free society, targets of obloquy confront a choice: They can ignore the vicious among their critics, and so risk allowing the smears to fester in the public's imagination. Or they can risk dignifying the vicious by addressing their charges directly.

Douglas Murray, a young Oxford-educated writer, has chosen the more direct approach. Avid and unabashed, he takes on neoconservatism's harshest critics and does not yield an inch. Indeed, contrary to the many critics who have announced that the neoconservative moment has passed, Murray contends that neoconservatism is just getting started. And the future beckons brightly. In the opening pages, Murray declares his "belief that the solution to many, if not all, of our problems lies in neoconservatism--not just because it provides an optimistic and emboldened conservatism, but because neoconservatism provides a conservatism that is specifically attuned, and attractive, to people today."

His own optimism and boldness, it must be said, sometimes lead him to overstate his case or gloss over difficulties, not least in his estimate of neoconservatism's contemporary appeal. In fact, such appeal is hard to reconcile with the very demonization, springing from the right as

well as the left, that has, in significant measure, called forth his efforts on neoconservatism's behalf. Yet one should not be deterred by this and other occasionally exuberant opinions that pop up in Murray's brief, invigorating book. Amid the clutter of calumnies that fill the airwaves, cyberspace, and newsprint, it provides a refreshing introduction to neoconservatism's intellectual origins, leading ideas, and guiding aims.

Murray emphasizes that neoconservatism, being neither a creed nor a school but rather a sensibility and style of thought, has a complex lineage. Sensibly, he chooses to begin his account from the most common misunderstanding, which absurdly traces the U.S. decision to invade Iraq to the teachings of Leo Strauss. It's not that Strauss, a lifelong scholar and teacher of the history of political philosophy, has not been a critical influence in shaping the neoconservative mind. But he did not promulgate a political program or advocate particular policies.

Strauss breathed new life into the idea of a liberal education, which he saw as an opportunity to liberate the mind from prejudices and to expose it to the treasures of human achievement in politics and thought. This liberation involved, among other things, acquiring an understanding of the weaknesses and disadvantages of liberal democracy, the better to grasp the remarkable benefits that liberal democracy confers, the enduring justice of its cause, and the institutions and ideas that sustain it. Murray emphasizes that, among the debilitating prejudices fostered by liberal democracy, was one that Strauss called relativism, and which consisted of the belief that the diversity of human views about right and wrong, and morality and immorality, were rooted in the diversity of cultures, and were all equally valid. Strauss diagnosed relativism as a decayed form of the admirable liberal doctrine of tolerance, and warned that it led to nihilism, or the belief that nothing is true and everything is permitted.

The first generation of neoconservatives--led by Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Nathan Glazer--entered the 1960s as liberals and Democrats, but rebelled against relativism's political symptoms, finding in the Johnson administration's Great Society welfare programs an inability to draw crucial moral distinctions and an obliviousness to the dependence of free and democratic institutions on character and culture. But by far the biggest and most dangerous expression of the relativist tendency, against which the first generation of neoconservatives rebelled, was the failure to grasp the menace of Communist tyranny and to recognize the monumental stakes of the Cold War.

Neoconservatives, Murray shows, differ from both traditional conservatives--and, to use a term that more accurately than "liberal" describes the left in America today, progressives. In contrast to traditional conservatives, neoconservatives are more comfortable with capitalism, always accepted the moral and political necessity of the welfare state, and consistently sought a prominent role for America in creating a stable and just international order.

In contrast to progressives, neoconservatives are more concerned about the costs of modernity's disruptive ways to the family and traditional morality, strongly doubt the ability of the federal government to improve America through higher taxes and more aggressive social policies, and are skeptical of the integrity and efficacy of the United Nations, while maintaining confidence in the ability of the American armed forces, when diplomacy is exhausted, to advance American interests and ideals.

Although the label neoconservative was originated on the left as a term of reproach, it captures an important truth. In post-1960s America, neoconservatism elaborated a new kind of conservatism, one that made conserving and revitalizing the material and moral preconditions of a free society the top political priority.

Neoconservatism in America today, according to Murray, continues to do battle against relativism, which, he argues, fuels opposition to the global war on terror. To be sure, as Murray points out, there has been no shortage of voices echoing Noam Chomsky's incoherent assertion that U.S. support for Osama bin Laden against the Soviets in the 1980s, and for Saddam Hussein in his war with Iran during the 1980s, should disqualify America from fighting terrorists and the nations that harbor them. And there are plenty, he adds, who, glossing over the U.N.'s sorry record of coddling dictators and failing to prevent bloodshed, argue in the name of cosmopolitanism, democratic humanism, or the international community that Americans who put American interests and American ideals first pose a leading threat to world peace. Yet these criticisms of the war are less an expression of relativism than an expression of poorly reasoned moral disapproval of the United States and its role in the world.

In addition to clarifying the connection between relativism and the resentment, envy, and arrogance that characterize so much progressive criticism of the United States and its fight against Muslim extremism, at least two other critical issues must be addressed to fill out Murray's introduction to neoconservatism. First, what lessons from the neoconservative critique of social engineering at home can be applied to the program for promoting liberty and democracy abroad? And second, what steps can be taken to minimize the tensions involved in seeking to conserve liberal democracy, a doctrine and way of life whose guiding principle--individual freedom--constantly struggles against the constraints of tradition, custom, and authority?

Critics may chuckle with satisfaction at the perplexities neoconservatism confronts. But the price the critics pay is moral and political blindness. Not that neoconservative solutions are always the right solutions. But the perplexities they confront are inscribed in the American way of life. They partly define the challenges of securing liberty at home, which is not separable today (if it ever was) from promoting it abroad. It is not the least of neoconservatism's achievements to have brought these perplexities into focus.

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