

# The Neocons and Iraq

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By

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In the foreign policy establishment, among progressives of all stripes, and even for significant segments of the conservative movement, "neoconservatism" has come to stand for all that has gone wrong in American foreign policy over the last seven years -- especially in Iraq. Yet much of the criticism misses the mark.

For starters, it's worth noting that the president, vice president, secretary of defense, secretary of state and the national security adviser all lacked neoconservative roots. And insofar as neoconservative thinkers influenced Iraq policy, the problem was not with neoconservative principles, but the failure to fully appreciate the implications of those principles.

Neoconservatism was never a well-developed school of foreign policy like realism or idealism. Nor is it a reflex, like isolationism or multilateralism. It was only with the Iraq war that neoconservatism came to be falsely identified by its critics with a single crude foreign policy idea -- that the United States should use military force, unilaterally if need be, to overthrow tyrants and to establish democracy.

Of course, isolating this idea from other considerations -- including the price tag of military intervention, our capacity to rebuild dictator-ravaged and war-torn states, the effect of our actions on regional stability and world opinion -- is a recipe for disaster. At least so would counsel the neoconservative tradition. In crafting policy, it is contrary to the spirit of neoconservatism to select from the variety of goals that commands the nation's attention some single one, and pursue it heedless of costs. Neoconservatism has its origins in a critique of policy making -- in both domestic and foreign affairs -- that fails to take consequences into account.

Two seminal documents, both of which stirred up storms in their day, typify the neoconservative sensibility. In 1965, 38-year-old Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then assistant secretary of labor for policy in the Johnson administration, produced a report on a highly

sensitive aspect of poverty in America. In "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," Moynihan argued that the black family in inner-city ghettos was crumbling, and that "so long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself."

Traditional conservatives saw such matters as beyond government's purview. Progressives of the day concentrated on government provision of monetary benefits. In contrast, Moynihan insisted on the need to craft a new kind of social policy. This policy, recognizing the centrality of upbringing, education, and culture to the formation of healthy and able citizens, aimed to rebuild the family structure for poor blacks.

In 1979, *Commentary* magazine published an ambitious essay by Georgetown University professor Jeane J. Kirkpatrick entitled, "Dictatorships and Double Standards." The article led Ronald Reagan in 1981 to appoint the Democrat as ambassador to the United Nations. Contrary to Carter administration foreign policy assumptions concerning Nicaragua and Iran, Kirkpatrick argued that democratization is not always the answer to authoritarian regimes -- particularly if they are friendly to the U.S. and laying foundations for freedom and prosperity, while those seeking revolutionary change are communist or Islamic totalitarians.

Although she favored a more activist foreign policy than did traditional conservative realists, Kirkpatrick emphasized that democracy is an achievement. "Decades, if not centuries," she sternly cautioned, "are normally required for people to acquire the necessary disciplines and habits."

The Moynihan report and the Kirkpatrick essay made decisive contributions to the forging of the sensibility that came to be known as neoconservatism. That sensibility evinces a fierce pride in American constitutional government. It insists that government policy should be judged not by the hopes of advocates and intentions of decision makers, but by real world consequences. It holds that freedom and democracy depend on qualities of mind and character that do not arise automatically, but must be cultivated by the family and civil society. It recognizes that government, while often part of the problem, can also be part of the solution by finding ways to strengthen both family and civil society. And it knows that America advances its interests by maintaining and expanding an international order that, to the extent possible, is composed of states that respect individual rights and are based on the consent of the governed.

The neoconservative sensibility, in short, is a powerful blend of ideas that have their roots in the larger liberal tradition, particularly the conservative side developed by Madison, Hamilton, Burke and Tocqueville. No doubt that blend and tradition should have counseled greater caution in the run up to the war in Iraq. It should have encouraged a keener awareness, particularly in light of 40 years of neoconservative criticism of the grandiose ambitions of social engineers, that implanting democracy in Iraq was among the greatest feats of social engineering ever conceived by a modern nation-state. It therefore demanded sustained attention to the likely impact of regime change on Iraqi society.

So what went wrong? The most likely explanation is one advanced by John Hopkins University political scientist Francis Fukuyama. Mesmerized by the rapid collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and then in the Soviet Union, he argued, neoconservative thinking drew a false analogy to the very different cultural circumstances of Arab and Muslim Iraq.

Still, the failure of today's neoconservatives to anticipate the challenges of postwar reconstruction does not discredit neoconservatism. To get swept away by the awesome spectacle in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union of popular uprisings followed by peaceful transitions to popular governments; to fail to incorporate into the assessment of military action the particular challenges presented by Iraqi religious beliefs, social structure, sectarian divisions, and the effects of decades of bloody dictatorial rule -- all this is to *lose sight of* neoconservative teachings about the material and moral preconditions of freedom and democracy.

That said, there is nobility and hard-headed realism in the stand that neoconservatives took in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and in their refusal to run for cover when the going got rough. Certainly more nobility and realism than in, say, Sen. Hillary Clinton's unending evasions and equivocations, or than in Sen. Barack Obama's oft-repeated promise that, should he become president, he will rapidly remove American troops. This promise is routinely reiterated without reference to the consequences for the Iraqi people or for American interests in the region and the world.

Neoconservatives faced up to, as few of their critics have, the grave threat posed by Saddam Hussein and the spiraling costs of our containment of his regime. They did not turn a blind eye to the conclusion of all major Western intelligence agencies that Saddam was developing weapons of mass destruction. They did not dismiss the real danger that Saddam, in a post-9/11 world, would transfer WMD to al Qaeda or other jihadists. They did not look away from Saddam's flagrant violation of international agreements and international law. They did not forget about the tens of thousands, mainly children, who were dying each year because Saddam was stealing Oil-for-Food money to prop up his military machine.

Neoconservatives did not ignore the destabilizing consequences of positioning American forces in Saudi Arabia to protect the Kingdom from Saddam's imperial ambitions. When the reconstruction of Iraq went badly, they did not kid themselves about the probable consequences of premature American withdrawal of troops, including the deaths of perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in an al Qaeda- and Iran-fueled civil war.

Things are now looking up, thanks to President Bush's steadfastness, Gen. David Petraeus's counterinsurgency strategy, and our extraordinary men and women in uniform. But this hasn't prevented neoconservatives from appreciating the need for the U.S. to make a long-term commitment to achieving stability and decent government in Iraq.

Our errors in Iraq provide a painful reminder that prudence is, as Edmund Burke proclaimed and the best of the neoconservative tradition emphatically insists, "the God of this lower world." The problem for those of us who analyzed the challenge of Saddam's Iraq from the perspective of neoconservative principles was not that we were too neoconservative, but that we were not neoconservative enough.

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