Is Neoconservatism Jewish?

shma.com/is-neoconservatism-jewish

Peter Berkowitz

In recent years, more than a few angry critics have insinuated with malicious intent that neoconservatism is an intrinsically Jewish school of politics and ideas. True, Jews are disproportionately represented in neoconservative ranks. But the same might be said of the ranks of communism, socialism, and liberalism, to say nothing of the ranks of lawyers, doctors, financiers, and comedians.

It is a matter of record that a small group of Jews played a leading role in the 1970s and 1980s in originating what has come to be known as neoconservatism, and many of neoconservatism's most prominent spokesmen today are Jewish. The sensibility or persuasion they cultivated did in some measure grow out of reflections on Jewish ideas and experiences: the biblical teaching that all human beings are created in God's image; the importance of tradition, family, and education; the horrors of the Holocaust; the enduring need for free nations to stand ready to take action, including military action, against the enemies of freedom; and Israel's struggles against terrorism, autocracy, and religiously inspired fanaticism.

Yet no account of neoconservatism would be respectable if it omitted mention of eminent non-Jews such as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat from N.Y. state and, as assistant secretary of Labor in 1965, author of The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, which created a national storm by arguing that the deterioration of the black family was a central cause of black poverty; Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, Democrat from Washington state and Cold War liberal around whom many emerging neoconservatives rallied in the 1970s; Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, a professor of government at Georgetown who staunchly represented the U.S. at the United Nations under Ronald Reagan; Father Richard John Neuhaus, founding editor of First Things and incisive analyst of religion and public life; William Bennett, former Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration, author of the bestselling Book of Virtues, and today host of a popular talk radio show; and James Q. Wilson, for many years a professor of government at Harvard and for decades an outstanding scholar of American politics.

More important, however, than the diversity of backgrounds of those who have elaborated it, is the fact that neoconservatism does not rest on Jewish premises. Nor does it seek to advance specifically Jewish goals.

Neoconservatism's founding premise is that liberal democracy in America is a great good. And its governing aim is to conserve the larger liberal tradition grounded in individual freedom, equality under law, tolerance for religious and political diversity, respect for private

property and free markets, and the practice of limited constitutional government.

This more conservative form of liberalism — which with equal justice might have been dubbed neoliberalism — arose in opposition to the left-wing interpretation of liberalism that emerged in the late 1960s and took hold in the 1970s. According to neoconservatives, this left-liberalism ignored or sought to undermine the discipline and culture on which liberty and democracy depended; searched for the solution to social ills in big government programs, that instead of encouraging habits of independence and personal responsibility fostered dependence on the state and unleashed personally and socially destructive conduct; and downplayed the evils of Soviet communism, the chief foreign threat to America, while greatly exaggerating America's flaws.

Neoconservatism's emphasis on conserving a more traditional understanding of the liberal tradition puts it in tension with social conservatism and libertarianism, its major partners in the broader conservative alliance in America. Neoconservatives argue in favor of greater respect for religion in public life, but stop short of those social conservatives who wish to infuse the constitutional framework with religion. And neoconservatives defend the free market as the engine of our prosperity and an expression of our freedom but are more attuned than many libertarians to the cultural contradictions of capitalism.

In foreign policy, neoconservatives also occupy an in-between position. They see a much closer convergence between the advancement of American interests and the pursuit of American ideals than do typical conservative realists. But in seeking to promote liberty and democracy abroad, neoconservatives are much more skeptical of the United Nations and other international bodies than standard liberal internationalists.

The Bush administration's decision in the fall of 2003 to emphasize the promotion of democracy as the chief justification for the invasion of Iraq exposed a deep division within neoconservative ranks. On the one hand, many neoconservative thinkers welcomed Bush's speeches, culminating in his Second Inaugural's ambitious call to spread liberty around the world, seeing in them a vindication of their belief that by virtue of its power and its principles, America was uniquely well positioned to advance its own interests by advancing the cause of freedom globally. On the other hand, over the last forty years, neoconservatism has done as much as any school in America to teach that liberty and democracy have moral and social preconditions, a teaching that, if taken to heart, would have compelled far greater caution than the Bush administration showed in undertaking to democratize societies in Afghanistan and Iraq whose language, family structure, tradition, sectarian divisions, and religious beliefs were largely unknown to American policymakers.

This division is a reflection of the deeper struggle in the neoconservative mind to appreciate the tension between, and mutual influence of, liberty and tradition, a topic that should be of permanent interest to Jews and non-Jews alike.