

THE NEOCONSERVATIVES: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

by Russell Kirk

There stands before you, ladies and gentlemen, one of the few survivors of the original intrepid band of Neoconservatives. Very early in the 1950s, some of us who declared our belief in the Permanent Things were so denominated by our adversaries; but we did not clasp the epithet to our bosoms as a badge of honor — unlike the people who, a quarter of a century later, pleaded guilty as charged, and gloried in their shame.

To put the matter another way, the terms “New Conservative” and “Neoconservative” began to appear in certain journals nearly forty years ago. They were applied to such writers as Robert Nisbet, Peter Viereck, Daniel Boorstin, Clinton Rossiter, and your servant. When commentators and critics of that remote epoch entertained sentiments kindly in some degree toward such literate obscurants, they used the term “New Conservative” — implying that misguided though such relatively youthful reactionaries might be, still they probably meant well, and occasionally displayed glimmerings of sense; nay, that now and again such New Conservatives even made suggestions worth discussing, though perhaps *per accidens*.

Such were the opinions of our friendlier critics. But journalists and professors who thought less well of us pinned upon us the dread label “Neoconservatives,” knowing us for symptoms of the recrudescence of a loathsome plague called reaction, enemies of all progress, oppressors of the poor, either tools of the bloated capitalist or else toadies of feudal barons, simpletons enamored of the superstitions of the childhood of the race. The worst fears of these evangels of secular progress came to be realized; they were true prophets. For indeed revived conservative doctrines were disseminated throughout the land by our malicious typewriters, and the American people were arrested in their march toward an earthly Zion.

Fresh Horde of Dissenters. Yet we scribbling conservatives at the beginning of the 1950s, or at least most of us, did not eagerly accept the appellation “New Conservative,” nor yet that of “Neoconservative.” Some of us merely styled ourselves conservatives, being well aware that conservatism is nothing new; others of our kidney preferred to bear no dog-tag.

Presently it came to pass, during the reign of King Lyndon the Dealer, that the media of opinion began to recognize the existence of a loose league of other persons whom we may call the New Neoconservatives, so to speak. This fresh horde of dissenters from Holy Liberalism were men and women of Manhattan, for the most part, and of Jewish stock

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chiefly — although they recruited some Protestant and Catholic auxiliaries. At one time or another, nearly all of them had professed to be radicals or ritualistic liberals — that a long time ago, in the case of some of their leaders. These are the Neoconservatives so much praised or drubbed nowadays. Mr. Irving Kristol and his associates accepted without much protest the Neoconservative tag pinned upon them by their adversaries — much as Whigs and Tories, during the seventeenth century, had come to wear as badges of honor the derisive epithets thrust upon them by enemies.

Vials of Scorn. Although I paid no very close attention to the emerging of these late recruits to the conservative movement, I did welcome their appearance, perceiving that not a few among them were people of talent and energy, active in serious journalism and in certain universities, and giving promise of the rise of conservative or quasi-conservative opinions among the Jewish intelligentsia of New York in particular — a class previously given over to radicalism or a disintegrated liberalism. Perhaps I expected too much of these Manhattan allies.

When the late Michael Harrington smote them hip and thigh, I was not taken aback: such an assault was to be expected from a Syndicalist. When Mr. Peter Steinfels, editor of *Commonweal* then, poured the vials of his scorn upon their devoted heads in a book entitled *The Neoconservatives*, I was puzzled that Mr. Joseph Sobran, in the pages of *National Review*, found some substance in Steinfels' acerbic criticisms; I encouraged Dr. Frank Annuziata to write for my quarterly *University Bookman* a defense of these Neoconservatives against Steinfels.

Insufficiently Capitalistic. Although one may trace the beginnings of Neoconservatism of the Manhattan sort back to the year 1965, the ladies and gentlemen of that political sect did not loom large for me until the early years of the Reagan Administration. I was mildly startled when, in 1980, Mr. George Gilder, addressing The Heritage Foundation, declared emphatically that he was no Neoconservative. (He found them insufficiently capitalistic, and morally inferior to Mrs. Phyllis Schlafly.) In short, I was prejudiced in favor of these Prodigal Sons, come home to a conservative patrimony, who have been denominated the Neoconservatives. How earnestly they founded magazine upon magazine! How skillfully they insinuated themselves into the councils of the Nixon and Reagan Administrations! How very audaciously some of them, a decade ago, proclaimed their ability to alter the whole tone of *The New York Times*. (That was a consummation devoutly to be wished, but it turned out to be a mere delusory hope of the Neoconservatives; the *Times* remains unregenerate.) Yet their *hubris* in that instance notwithstanding, the Neoconservatives certainly displayed enterprising talents in their early years.

For some persons who are called, or who call themselves, Neoconservatives, my approbation is undiminished. Who would not welcome to an alliance such champions of truth as Pastor [Richard John] Neuhaus, such prudent sociologists as the Doctors [Peter and Brigitte] Berger, such redoubtable educators as Diane Ravitch, such sound scholars as Nathan Glazer? Often such opponents of nihilism and fanatic ideology contend in the Academy against bitter enemies who outnumber the Neoconservative professors many times over. Let us sustain them.

Yet in general the Neoconservative group have not made many friends nor influenced many people, despite talents for self-publicizing. As Mr. Ben Hart, tongue somewhat in cheek, observed to me about the Neoconservatives while we were arranging this lecture, "There are only about three of them." They have no true political constituency, not even in Manhattan — or perhaps especially not in Manhattan. They have shown no great literary skill: I fear that not one book by a Neoconservative will still be read in the year 2000. Neoconservatives have tended regrettably to become a little sect, distrusted and reproached by what we may call mainline conservatives, who now and again declare that many of the Neoconservatives are seeking chiefly place and preferment. Incidentally, doubtless many of you present today, ladies and gentlemen, have observed that the addresses of certain eminent Neoconservatives have been rejected by the people round Vice-President Bush; and it appears to me that, for good or ill, President Bush will not be eager to obtain the services of this little Sacred Band — which had made itself exclusive, and now finds itself excluded.

Selfish and Uninstructed. I offer you two specimens of the rejection of the Neoconservatives that I encounter nowadays in many quarters. My first extract is from a letter recently received from a very distinguished historian in Pennsylvania. "I have burned my bridges with most (not all) of the Konservatives, and especially with the neo-conservatives, who are selfish and uninstructed radicals and progressives, wishing to pour cement all over the country and make the world safe for democracy, well beyond the dreams of Wilson," he writes to me. "A feeling for the land, for its conservation, and for the strong modesty of a traditional patriotism (as distinct from nationalism) none of them has."

My second instance of the spreading distaste for Neoconservatives comes from a well-known literary scholar. "I would not be at all surprised to see the Neo-Cons jump ship if Dukakis is elected; they would be perfectly capable of making an accommodation with the socialist wing of the Democratic Party," he tells me. "... It is significant that when the Neo-Cons wish to damn any conservative who has appealed for a grant to a conservative foundation, they tell the officers of the foundation that the conservative is a fascist. . . . I believe that the chief enemy of American conservatism has not been the Marxists, nor even the socialist liberals in the Democratic Party, but the Neo-Conservatives, who have sabotaged the movement from within and exploited it for their own selfish purposes."

Simple Old Label. Now the strictures of the gentlemen I have quoted cannot well apply to some of the better known people called Neoconservatives; for there are among that group high-minded men and women of principle. Our difficulty here is very like that I encountered when I lectured, a few months ago, on the Libertarians: the appellation Neoconservative, like the appellation Libertarian, is so widely employed, and so variously, as to seem to include people of radically opposed views. What is a Neoconservative, really? Is he, as Harrington and Steinfels saw him, a liberal who opportunistically has turned his coat? Is he primarily a seeker after power and the main chance? Or is he a man who has new ideas about the defense of the Permanent Things? For my part, I wish that certain so-called Neoconservatives whose views and lives I approve, like certain Libertarians for whom I have a fellow feeling, would content themselves, as do I, with the simple old label Conservative.

Be that as it may, I predict that within a very few years we will hear no more of the Neoconservatives: some will have fallen away, and others will have been merged with the main current of America's conservative movement, and yet others' pert loquacity will have been silenced by the tomb. After all, the leading Neoconservatives are not new people; they have become old people already, as I have myself. There was published in a recent number of *Commentary* a charmingly naive essay in which it was argued that the children and grandchildren of extant Neoconservatives would come to form a Sacred Band, calling themselves Neoconservatives life long, and ruling the American roost. This dream ignores the fact that things initially new do not long remain new: everything ages; yesteryear's novelty ceases to charm.

Ignoring Experience. Self-proclaimed political elites do not long endure in this democratic republic; but the Neoconservatives prefer to ignore Experience — a hard master, Benjamin Franklin says. Those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it, as Santayana reminds us. Deficient in historical understanding as in familiarity with humane letters, most of the Neoconservatives lack those long views and that apprehension of the human condition which forms a basis for successful statecraft. Often clever, these Neoconservatives; seldom wise.



Having dreed the weird of the faction called the Neoconservatives, I proceed to praise them. For despite the seeming harshness of the judgments I uttered a few minutes ago, I have many sympathies with the Neoconservatives, and admiration for some of them. Permit me, then, to touch upon their achievements.

The Art of the Possible. First, in a time when riotous students and urban mobs did very much as they pleased; in an era when the Academy and the learned societies were dominated by radical doctrinaires; when the blunders domestic and foreign of the Johnson Administration enfeebled the nation — why, at that juncture the Neoconservatives came forward, proclaiming that politics is the art of the possible, and did their best in the cause of sound sense. They drubbed sentimental liberalism and scorned radical fanaticism. In that hour they maintained stoutly the rule of law and the politics of prudence.

Second, we are in debt to the Neoconservatives for their founding of several intelligent serious journals — somewhat narrow in their scope and their readership and in their circle of contributors, perhaps, but containing many valuable articles on public policy, education, and other major subjects of the day. These publications have helped to demonstrate that, after all, conservatives are not so stupid as John Stuart Mill fancied them to be.

Third, in the realm of domestic politics at least, the Neoconservatives began discussion of practical alternatives to mere social drifting; they, or some of them, knowing that the national clock could not be turned back to the year 1928, endeavored to frame public policies that would meet realistically the necessities of the concluding three decades of the 20th century.

Fourth, in foreign policy the Neoconservatives have opposed manfully — or, in the case of Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, womanfully — the designs and menaces of the Soviet

Union. They have been well aware that America is not merely opposing a national rival, but (graver peril) combatting an armed doctrine — as Burke said of British resistance to the Jacobins two centuries ago. Sometimes, true, they have been rash in their schemes of action, pursuing a fanciful democratic globalism rather than the national interest of the United States; on such occasions I have tended to side with those moderate Libertarians who set their faces against foreign entanglements. And not seldom it has seemed as if some eminent Neoconservatives mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States — a position they will have difficulty in maintaining, as matters drift in the Levant. Yet by and large, I think, they have helped to redeem America's foreign policy from the confusion into which it fell during and after the wars in southeastern Asia. In this they have redressed the balance in the conduct of foreign affairs. In a little while, nevertheless, I shall utter some misgivings about possible long-run consequences of their understanding of America's international undertakings.

A Matter of Judicious Speculation. In short, the Neoconservatives have exercised considerable intellectual influence (though not conspicuously in the Academy), and have taken a vigorous hand in the decisions of the national government, during an era when the conservative movement in this country needed reinforcement. Whether they can achieve much of value in the future is a matter for judicious speculation — to which I now proceed.



A little while ago I remarked that the Neoconservatives are often clever, but seldom wise. T.S. Eliot's lines from *The Rock* may be applied to them:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

In their publications, the Neoconservatives thrust upon us a great deal of useful information, and obviously are possessed of considerable knowledge of the world about us. But in the understanding of the human condition and in the apprehension of the accumulated wisdom of our civilization, they are painfully deficient.

Infatuation with Ideology. An instance of this lack of wisdom is the Neoconservatives' infatuation with ideology. Some of you ladies and gentlemen present here today may have heard some years ago my exchange, on this very platform, with Mr. Irving Kristol, concerning ideology. He and various of his colleagues wish to persuade us to adopt an ideology of our own to set against Marxist and other totalist ideologies. Ideology, I venture to remind you, is political fanaticism: at best it is the substitution of slogans for real political thought. Ideology animates, in George Orwell's phrase, "the streamlined men who think in slogans and talk in bullets."

Over the years, I have written a good deal about the curse of ideological infatuation; so I do not propose today to digress at any length on that grim subject. I refer you, rather, to the recently-published collection of Dr. Gerhart Niemeyer's essays entitled *Aftersight and Foresight*. In his essay "Ideas Have Also Roots," Professor Niemeyer reproves Mr. Kristol

for his unfortunate advocacy of a “Republican ideology,” and goes on to describe the unhappy infiltration of ideological illusions into American politics.

Role of Humpty Dumpty. “Ideology is not confined to communists and fascists,” Dr. Niemeyer writes. “We, too, have our share of it, and it shows in our policies. All modern ideologies have the same irrational root: the permeation of politics with millenarian ideas of pseudo-religious character. The result is a dreamworld. Woodrow Wilson dreamed both of ‘a world safe for democracy,’ and of ‘enduring peace,’ ‘world safe from war.’ More recently, our national leaders have talked about ‘creating’ a new society, a ‘Great Society,’ and to that end making ‘war against poverty,’ ‘war against hunger,’ ‘creating new men,’ ‘making the world new as at the beginning,’ building ‘a city shining on a hill.’ All these presume that man could create himself, implying that he is not a creature, dependent on God, but the master of his own soul and destiny. Civilizational activities are given the character of salvation and thus stamped with a label of sacredness.”

A very recent example of this puerile infatuation of the Neoconservatives with “a new ideology” or “an American ideology” is a very lengthy, highly pretentious article by Mr. Michael Novak in the fall 1988 number of that interesting magazine *This World*. Entrenching himself behind a formidable array of footnotes — most of them citations from his own writings — Mr. Novak advocates ideology as “an indispensable but secondary guide to social action.” Unlike many Neoconservatives, Mr. Novak does pay some respects to religion in this essay — conveniently ignoring the unpleasant fact that all ideologies are anti-religions, or inverted religions. But the reader may suspect, uncomfortably, that Mr. Novak’s sentiments are much like those of the late Robert S. Kerr, long senator from Oklahoma, who was given to intoning from time to time, “God always has His arm around my shoulder.” In his role of Humpty Dumpty, Novak presumes to redefine this word ideology: he instructs us that “Ideology is a guiding vision of future social action.” Words mean, of course, whatever Humpty Dumpty and Michael Novak wish them to mean.

“This Vision Stuff.” In the light of this definition, one heartily endorses the offhand remark of Vice-President George Bush that he does not relish “this vision stuff.” Visionary politics, as Dr. Niemeyer emphasizes in the paragraph I quoted a moment ago, do not open our way to an Earthly Paradise.

What is this ideology that Kristol and Novak would have us embrace? Why, the ideology of a term Mr. Novak has popularized, “Democratic Capitalism.”

By vigorous advocacy of Democratic Capitalism, by doctrinaire attachment to that ideology, Mr. Kristol and Mr. Novak are saying in effect, Marxism will be undone and the American people will be given a vision of social perfection. What a feeble reed they put into one’s hand.

Not caring to break a butterfly on the wheel, I offer you merely a very succinct refutation of the strange notion that the ideology called Democratic Capitalism can set our collective American steps aright. First of all, the phrase is a contradiction in terms; for capitalism is not democratic, nor should it be, nor can it be. The test of the market is not a matter of counting noses and soliciting votes; and the mark of capitalism is not the fallacy that “one man is as good as another, or maybe a little better,” but large decisions by shrewd

