

# George W. Bush: A Neo-Conservative?

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/25/george-w-bush-a-neo-conservative/>

MIKE SPAAN, MAY 25 2015

### **What is Neo-Conservatism and how did this Influence American Foreign Policy during the Presidency of George W. Bush?**

The neo-conservative movement has been one of the most controversial in the modern post-Cold War era of International Relations (Leffler 2005 395; Williams 2005: 307). Its adherents are principally American intellectuals, writers and public servants. Despite this, much confusion still exists as to the nature of the movement and its ideas. The movement came about in the latter part of the 1960s, and garnered considerable influence since that time (Boot 2004: 21; Williams 2005: 309; Singh 2009: 34). This influence, however, remained on the fringes of policy-making until the administration of George W. Bush adopted some policies and strategies that could loosely be described as neo-conservative tenets. This paper has two distinct aims. First, to explore what neo-conservatism entails in the modern post-Cold War era and, secondly, to explore the degree to which neo-conservatives were able to influence the Bush administration. In doing so, this paper hopes to refute commonly held misconceptions about the movement and more importantly, the degree to which it was able to influence, or as some would assert, 'hijack' United States (US) foreign policy under President Bush (Austin 2005: 53). This supposedly occurred, in dreadfully ironic fashion, in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, when the US was infamously attacked by the terror group Al-Qaeda.

This paper will proceed with a detailed discussion on the neo-conservative movement, outlining its key ideas and introducing its pre-eminent thinkers. It will then move on to the issue of discussing how influential neo-conservatism was as a set of ideas and a movement in the foreign policy of George W. Bush. This paper agrees with the majority of the academic literature in the debate around influence, that neo-conservatism did not drive foreign policy and arguing otherwise remains unconvincing. Rather, there are similarities between Bush as an 'assertive' or 'conservative nationalist' and neo-conservative ideas, however, there are key differences in areas, such as democracy promotion. As Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay have noted, it represented more of a 'marriage of convenience' between the Bush administration and some neo-conservative principles, in the face of a catastrophe and the need for action (Daalder and Lindsay 2003: 16). The Bush doctrine, as it later became known, does not represent neo-conservatism, nor does it mean that the Bush administration is neo-conservative itself. (Ibid.: 13-14). In its stead, are principles that remain overtly nationalist in nature, ultimately showing neo-conservatism was a 'marginal influence.' (Hurst 2005: 75)

#### *The Neo-Conservative Movement & Their Ideas*

The Neo-Conservative individual and the larger movement are characterised by a distinct lack of ubiquity in their ideas (Fukuyama quoted in Kampmark 2011: 1888). There is such a diverse set of individual viewpoints that this paper cannot possibly attempt to address all with sufficient detail or attention. One would hard-pressed to understand any element of neo-conservatism as a whole without bearing this in mind. In fact, according to Robert Singh, "[o]ne of the few features of neo-conservatism o which its supporters and critics concur is its historical provenance." (Singh 2009: 34)

The movement began in the late 1960s and early 1970s among 'Democrats and recovering Marxists' who, according to neo-conservatism's 'intellectual godfather' Irving Kristol, had been 'mugged by reality' (Boot 2004: 21; Williams 2005: 309; Singh 2009: 34) in the face of 'humiliation in Vietnam' rejecting the 'Liberal idealism of the Democratic Party' on the one hand and 'Nixon-Kissinger Realism' on the other (Singh 2009: 34). Original members of the

# George W. Bush: A Neo-Conservative?

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movement included Kristol and Henry 'Scoop' Jackson who "...were driven rightwards by the excesses of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when crime was increasing in the United States, the Soviet Union was gaining ground in the Cold War, and the dominant wing of the Democratic Party was unwilling to get tough on either problem." (Boot: 2004: 21). Michael Harrington agrees, noting that that the movement was "grounded...in its opposition to the welfare state and the emergence of a bureaucratic New Class." (Quoted in Kampmark 2011: 1888).

So, what actually is neo-conservatism? This question is difficult to answer precisely because there is no ubiquity in the movement and, as Stephen Halper and Jonathan Clarke put it, there is "...no curia, no politburo, no...figure presiding sternly over doctrinal rectitude...[and] canonical texts are in short supply." (Halper and Clarke 2004: 10). Thus, a distinct feature of neo-conservatism is that it can be seen as an abstraction that only lives in the minds of current propagators and adherents continuously arguing its merits as a set of political ideas. Furthermore, numerous attempts have been made to find key principles that would characterise a neo-conservative with varying results. Complicating the definitional issue further is the belief that there are two distinct generations of neo-conservative, as Maria Ryan has asserted (Ryan 2010: 492). There is the Cold War generation, including the likes of Irving Kristol, Henry 'Scoop' Jackson etc., and the post-Cold War generation, including the likes of Robert Kagan, William Kristol and Charles Krauthammer.

In order to mitigate this issue, this paper will focus on the post-Cold War generation due this paper's essay question's specific referral to the Bush foreign policy. Still, there is but some direct cross-over between definitions offered by the post-Cold War generation as many are individualistic in their opinions. Thus, in the view of this paper it may be necessary to put forward an all-encompassing view of neo-conservatism's core tenets to avoid over-simplification of the nature of the neo-conservative narrative. One such tenet, is the adherence to the philosophical writings of Leo Strauss, according to Thomas Kane. Especially, neo-conservatives subscribe to the view that America must only "strengthen its ties to 'democratic allies,' and it needs to "promote the cause of political and economic freedom abroad." (Kane 2006: 137)

This is a recurring theme that forms one of the bedrocks of neo-conservatism. This paper finds six key principles that most academics have agreed upon. The ideas put forward, it has widely been argued, were critical elements driving foreign policy during the Bush presidency (Ruiz 2010). Neo-conservatives themselves may disagree with some elements, however, as aforementioned this paper is not designed to take into account each individual neo-conservative. Rather, it encompasses the entire movement in order to assess a degree of influence they garnered in the United States' foreign policy. In the view of this paper, the core principles were been found to be:

1. "US retention of its primary leadership position in the international system...[necessitating an]increase [in] defence spending..." (Norman 1999 in Hurst 2005:78)"
2. "[A] state's foreign policy reflects liberal and democratic values...US power should be placed at the disposal of moral objectives." (Fukuyama in Kampmark 2011: 1889)
3. "The necessity of developing a national missile defence system to counter the threat of rogue states armed with weapons of mass destruction." (Norman 1999 in Hurst 2005:78)
4. "An incurable scepticism about the legitimacy of international law and institutions." "Rejection of the notion that the US should always resolves problems multilaterally." (Ibid.:78; Fukuyama in Kampmark 2011: 1889)
5. "A primary focus on the Middle East and global Islam as the principal theatre for American overseas interests. (Halper and Clarke 2004: 10)
6. "[S]ocial engineering projects (the Great Society programmes of the 1960s, for instance) are to be regarded with suspicion." (Fukuyama in Kampmark 2011: 1889)

## *Neo-Conservative Influence in the Foreign Policy of George W. Bush*

With these principles in mind it is possible to determine the level and type of influence these ideas, and their advocates, had on the foreign policy of President Bush. Before this can be done, however, it is imperative to outline in what sense they apparently influenced foreign policy in the United States, when this occurred, and finally, who the prominent actors were in these situations. From this position, it will become increasingly apparent that the Bush White House was *not* influenced by an ostensibly neo-conservative line of thought. Primary among all debates about

# George W. Bush: A Neo-Conservative?

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the Bush presidency is the Iraq War and the sheer size of literature on the conflict necessitates this paper to engage with it. There is a popular belief that the Iraq War was driven solely by the neo-conservative elements in the administration (Halper and Clarke 2004). Jean-Marie Ruiz even calls it 'common knowledge.' (Ruiz 2006: 36) Further, there is a belief that the even the highest levels of the US government were either neo-conservatives or, at least, used their theoretical underpinnings to 'hijack' the foreign policy of the United States (Austin 2004: 53). As will be shown below, the neo-conservative influence in the administration and its foreign policy was minimalistic in reality.

## *The Post-Cold War Neo-Conservative*

To begin, the supposed 'common knowledge' that Bush's foreign policy, in his first term, "was guided by a neo-conservative agenda" is quite problematic (Ruiz 2006: 36). There is no convincing evidence that the neo-conservative movement had any influence in the Bush White House prior to the event of September 11, 2001 (Dueck 2010: 266). Though Caroline Kennedy-Pipe would dispute this on the basis that the inner workings of the Bush White House were already underpinned by neo-conservative elements including Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz (Kennedy-Pipe 2012: 378-379). It is only after 9/11 that a dramatic shift in foreign policy-making occurs, culminating in the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States (Austin 2005: 48). The void left in the wake of 9/11 prompted the immediate need for action, and this included fighting abroad if necessary. In effect, the domestically-orientated presidency of the first months became internationalised due to 9/11. In fact, "[p]rior to the terrorist attacks of September 2001, Bush was sceptical toward arguments for military intervention overseas." (Dueck 2010: 266) Instead, during this first months of office he "...pursued strategies of hardened containment in relations to North Korea and Iran." (Ibid.: 271) After 9/11, foreign policy takes central stage and principles like expanding US primacy and, regime change, democratization and unilateral action take hold for the first time.

The individuals most credited with influencing US foreign policy, especially after 9/11, occupy positions both inside and outside the administration. Beginning with those within the administration, we find five key figures. These individuals are what Max Boot refers to as the 'usual suspects' of neo-conservatism and include: "Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of Defence; Douglas Feith, under-secretary of defence for policy; Lewis Libby, the vice president's chief of staff; Elliot Abrams, the National Security Council staffer for Near East, Southwest Asian, and North African Affairs. And Richard Perle, a member of the Defence Policy Board." (Boot 2004: 20)

As is apparent, these men held positions of varying importance, yet all hold the common characteristic of falling outside the highest echelons of government, and therefore could not have been a driving force behind government policy. However, time and time again the influence of Paul Wolfowitz seems to be considered particularly high and therefore deserves our attention. Bruce Jentleson noted this, arguing that the deputy secretary was able to bring considerable pressure to bear in support of unilateralist action in the wake of 9/11 (Jentleson 2010: 283). Andrew Austin also points to Wolfowitz as being key to the shifting of foreign policy in a 'more aggressive' and 'imperialist' direction. Importantly, Austin attributes the focus on Iraq to Wolfowitz, quoting the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance as evidence. In the document the authors, including Wolfowitz and then Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney, criticised George H.W. Bush's "ending of the war with Iraq prematurely." (Austin 2010: 55) After 2001, Wolfowitz and Cheney were in a position to return to the Middle East and finally take out Saddam Hussein's regime (Ibid.: 55).

These arguments, however, have largely been discredited by a majority of the extensive literature (i.e. Daalder and Lindsay 2003; Hurst 2005; Singh 2009; Dueck 2010). Neo-conservative thinking, although comparable to the actions taken by the United States after 9/11 (especially considering some neo-conservatives were present within the administration) does not translate to a degree of influence that is even remotely close to the level Halper and Clark credit them with achieving. Their numbers represent a drop in the ocean in terms of the size of the US policy-making, with scores of personnel that "were anything but neo-conservatives" (Singh 2009: 32).

Contrasted with the people who did represent the highest echelons in charge of foreign policy, we find that not a single one of them are neo-conservative in their thinking or beliefs (Boot 2003: 20-21). Condoleezza Rice, national security advisor, Donald Rumsfeld, secretary of defence, Colin Powell, secretary of State, Vice President Dick Cheney and the president himself are all conservatives, and in some cases like Rumsfeld, Cheney and Bush, ardent nationalists. Powell, however, is anything but an 'assertive nationalist' and can better be described as a classic

# George W. Bush: A Neo-Conservative?

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'liberal internationalist.' (Ibid.: 20)

Outside the administration, we find that they are mainly influential and 'prolific writers' (Halper and Clarke 2004: 10) positing the neo-conservative ideals through public such mediums as the American Enterprise Institute, and publications like the Weekly Standard, Commentary and Public Interest. William Kristol, Joshua Muravchik, Robert Kagan and Charles Krauthammer are key among the individuals in the latter category.

Here too, measuring their actual influence is difficult at the best of times due to the lack of ubiquity among them. Ryan reveals this in her investigation of major neo-conservative writers. Muravchik for instance, disagrees with the notion that "America should "export democracy" by military force." (Ryan 2010: 496) Kagan, in similar fashion "called for a moralistic alternative to balance-of-power realism. However, he did not want a crusade for global democracy but something rather more pragmatic..." (Ibid.: 496) This is in notable contrast to the likes of Krauthammer, who stated: "Yes, we should risk war when our will and conscience are challenged." (Ibid.: 496)

## *Neo-Conservative Influence?*

Those who argue the 'popular view' that neo-conservative ideas represented the back-bone of US foreign policy in the post-9/11 world are ambiguous to the distinctions between neo-conservatism and the type of conservatism held by the highest levels of the White House and government apparatuses more generally. Halper and Clarke, crucially, are some of the chief advocates of neo-conservative influence during that era. They argue that the Bush presidency constituted "an unfortunate detour, veering away from the balanced, consensus building, and resource-husbanding approach that has characterized traditional Republican internationalism..." (Halper and Clarke 2004: 9) Thus, a transformation occurred that was substantial enough to conclude that these neo-conservatives "...moved to take charge of America's war machine" after 9/11 eventually leading the US into Afghanistan and Iraq (Ibid.: 9). Halper and Clarke do concede, however, that this 'aberration' was 'momentary and containable' and that under normal circumstances their influence 'will gradually dwindle.' (Ibid.: 10) Andrew Austin, agrees, stating that the "the judicial coup of 2000 that led to the Bush presidency provided the opening the neo-conservatives had been waiting for: an ideological president receptive to the ideas..." (Austin 2005: 56) Austin continues to assert that by 2000, the neo-conservative movement had positioned itself "well for the takeover of US foreign policy." (Ibid.)

This line of argument, however, is weak at best and at worst outright overplaying the hand of the neo-conservatives. Stephen Hurst said it clearly, stating that the neo-conservatism 'has been [at best] a marginal influence,' because in reality the foreign policy, in both post- and pre-9/11, was "characterized primarily by a different kind of conservative ideology." (Hurst 2005: 75) Indeed, the differing ideology that Hurst speaks of is that of the 'conservative nationalist.' (Ibid.: 75) Daalder and Lindsay agree, in an earlier investigation, calling Bush the 'assertive nationalist' (Daalder and Lindsay 2003: 15). Finally, Colin Dueck takes a slightly different stance using the term 'nationalist as interventionist' to describe George Bush (Dueck 2010: 266). The consensus is that Bush was an overt nationalist in his beliefs and his foreign policy ultimately translated that view.

The issue, Hurst argues, is despite the fact that neo-conservatives and conservative nationalists agree on many points including American primacy and distrust of international institutions (Hurst 2005: 78-80), they disagree on others which are critical to discerning the type of ideology underpinning the policies adopted by the US. Prominent among these disagreements, for example, is that neo-conservatives see democracy promotion as the 'primary objective of US foreign policy.' (Ibid.: 81) This is because they view the democratic peace thesis as the quintessential manner in achieving a secure international system free from conflict. On the other hand, "conservative nationalists are not indifferent to democracy...[but] they are sceptical...about whether democracy promotion is a solution to international conflict and whether the US is able to achieve it." (Ibid.: 81) Thus, the war in Iraq can be seen, not as an attempt to bring peace and democracy to the Middle East, but to remove Saddam Hussein and his supposed weapons of mass destruction. The consequences would be dealt with as they came about. Similarly, on Human Rights promotion, both sides disagree as conservative nationalists find it much less important to do so (Ibid.: 82).

Daalder and Lindsay take a more conditioned view, stating that the constitution of US foreign policy was not neo-conservative in the overt sense. Rather, the Bush Administration engaged in a 'marriage of convenience' in which

# George W. Bush: A Neo-Conservative?

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certain ideas were adopted, but crucially that this was a path chosen by Bush. This in turn, causing Daalder and Lindsay to famously assert that the transformation of US foreign policy was Bush's 'revolution.' (2003: 2) No mention is made to a 'neo-conservative' revolution of any kind. The path that the US took after 9/11 lays square in the hands of the President. Instead, they point to the Bush revolution happening as early as the campaign trail for his presidency. "What 9/11 provided was the rationale and the opportunity" to undertake it (Ibid.: 13). Daalder and Lindsay point to two fundamental principles that constituted the Bush revolution. First, America had to shed its constraints in such a dangerous world and the second "was that an America unbound should use its strength to change the status quo into the world." (Ibid.: 13) These two principles may be acceptable to neo-conservatives but do not serve core interests like promoting democratisation, American moral values and focusing on any specific region (Halper and Clarke 2004: 10; Fukuyama in Kampmark 2011: 1889). Hence, Daalder and Lindsay calling Bush an 'assertive nationalist' due to his willingness to use American force unilaterally. Melvyn Leffler, takes this one step further arguing that Bush policy underpinnings "have deep roots in the history of American foreign policy." (Leffler 2005: 395) This brings into doubt the revolutionary aspect of Bush's foreign policy, but that is beside the point. Indeed, the point is that it remains Bush's decision to shift foreign policy from his leadership position in government, with a particularly high degree of autonomy.

In conclusion, neo-conservatism has become one of the most controversial movements in the modern era. The Bush White House, was supposedly driven by its main tenets, as outlined in this paper. However, this paper points to two alternative realities. The first, is that the commonalities in Bush's and neo-conservative ideologies are merely that, commonalities, because there are clear distinctions that ultimately reveal neo-conservative influence was minimal. If this influence had been vast, as is oft asserted, very different objectives would have taken centre stage in US foreign policy, namely promotion of democracy and American values. This has not been the case. The second reality is one where 'assertive' or 'conservative' nationalism was the ideological driving force behind policy making, clearly distinct in its nature from neo-conservatism. This leads to a renewal in understanding that Bush foreign policy as one with commonalities of other ideologies but one that was markedly characterised by his own particular ideas. All in all, perhaps the characterisation as a marriage of convenience is most apt to describe the course taken by George W. Bush, both before and after 9/11, in US foreign policy.

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# George W. Bush: A Neo-Conservative?

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Date Written: January 2015