

The Importance of Neoconservatism Since 9/11 Has Been Much Overstated

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/09/09/the-importance-of-neoconservatism-since-911-has-been-much-overstated/>

LUCIE PARKER, SEP 9 2015

This paper will begin by outlining the accusation that a neoconservative coterie hijacked the opportunity presented by 9/11 to project their worldview into the subsequent policy vacuum. The agenda-setting framework of Haar, Halper and Clarke, and Mazarr will be drawn upon to explain this charge. This argument will then be criticised for pushing Bush and his top-tier clique into a secondary role whilst overstating neoconservatism as the driving force behind America's shift in foreign policy. To challenge these misrepresentations, the well-established worldview of Bush and his clique will be propagated as the real foundation of the Bush doctrine: the post-9/11 policy shift was a natural extension of their pre-existing intellectual currents. Furthermore, Bush's foreign policy encompassed tenets that were incompatible with neoconservatism, making it half-hearted neoconservatism at best. Finally, the real nature of neoconservatism will be demonstrated to be a secondary role of intellectual support for Bush and his clique as the primary drivers of post-9/11 foreign policy.

To characterise neoconservatism as a 'movement' is to misrepresent its nature through exaggerating its degree of intellectual cohesion; rather, it exists as a 'persuasion' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 10; Kristol, 2003). This persuasion embodies 'an idealist strand and a power strand: Wilsonianism provides the idealism, an emphasis on military power provides the teeth' (Mearsheimer cited in Schmidt and Williams, 2008: 199). Neo-conservatives understand 'a world of Hobbesian state-of-nature primitivism' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 12). Their ideological response to this anarchical world is projected through their 'Wilsonianism with teeth' worldview into a two-pronged foreign policy toolkit of moral clarity and military strength. Underpinning this toolkit is the fundamental belief in U.S. exceptionalism. Having won the Cold War, America 'stands as the world's most preeminent power' (PNAC, 1997). This unipolarity brings responsibility; America must pursue a global leadership role that shapes the international order in line with U.S. strategic and ideological predominance.

This duty immortalises the promotion of American values as the first prong of neoconservative foreign policy. Exceptionalism is founded upon freedom and democracy; practically this means America has the responsibility to establish these values abroad, exercising its 'benevolent hegemony' to maintain peace (Kagan, 1998). The second prong is the belief that America must preemptively flex its militaristic might to defend these idealistic causes; only militarism can shape global circumstances to America's advantage because international relations are conducted solely through military power (PNAC, 1997). This creates 'a tendency toward unilateralism' (Kagan, 2008). The predominant arena of focus for neoconservative foreign policy is the Middle East; they advance a policy that combines America's moral obligations to Israel with the objective of democratisation across the whole region (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 24). A democratic Middle East is the first step towards their exceptionalist vision of a 'global pax Americana' (George, 2005: 190).

The shockwaves of vulnerability produced by 9/11 did not change the world's threats; they changed the *perceptions* of these threats, sparking a re-evaluation of U.S. national security policy. Bush's reinforced purpose in protecting America's people and freedom from future attacks formulated the Bush doctrine. He expanded U.S. national security interests to 'make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them' (2001). These interests would be protected through both a retaliatory attack on Afghanistan to break the network of terrorism responsible for 9/11, and *preemptively* confronting threats from terror-sponsoring regimes. Inextricably

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linked to protecting these interests was the propagation of American values as 'an alternative to the enemy's ideology of repression' (Bush, 2011: 397). The underlying aim of the Bush doctrine's marathon war on terror strategy was to 'establish an international norm against terrorism in order to delegitimize it as a tactic' (Rice, 2011: 98). The first target of this pre-emption was Iraq.

Using 9/11 to unveil an aggressive new doctrine that provided the theoretical context for 'a pre-emptive strike against an uncertain threat' provoked rippling consternation throughout the international community (Lemann, 2002; Keller, 2002). Wading through the justification fatigue to clarify if the Iraq invasion was an appropriate national security response to 9/11 has given birth to the following accusation: a coterie of neoconservatives seized upon the 9/11-induced window of vulnerability, hijacking Bush's foreign policy to implement their long-cherished agenda of regime change in Iraq. Wolfowitz's 1979 assessment of Persian Gulf threats enshrined the Iraqi threat in neoconservative strategy. Iraq was the most feasible target for Middle Eastern democratisation: Saddam's brutal regime remained 'a festering problem' since the unresolved end of the 1991 Gulf war (Rumsfeld, 2011: 416). As such, the neoconservative theory that a free Iraq would trigger a democratic domino effect all the way to their arch nemesis of Iran created the following foreign policy blueprint: a pre-emptive use of America's exceptional force to shape the Middle East in line with America's exceptional values, using Iraq as the first target towards a pax Americana.

Haar (2010), Halper and Clarke (2004), and Mazarr (2007) adopt the agenda setting framework to explain how the neoconservatives utilised 9/11 to successfully execute this blueprint as the Bush administration's foreign policy. Mazarr characterises 9/11 as a 'focusing event' that created a policy window whereby an inexperienced Bush required a new strategic response (2007: 14). Halper and Clarke then emphasise that the neoconservative pre-existing agenda was dusted off and relabelled as this response (2004: 4). How it came to be chosen as the appropriate strategy was due to an important distinction: the neoconservatives were in a position where they were *actively driving* foreign policy, as opposed to merely *playing a role* as policy contributors (2004: 149). They exploited their 'powerful intellectual-political matrix' to drag the spotlight away from the root causes of 9/11 and onto their pre-existing focus of state sponsors of terror (2004: 109).

Neoconservatives *inside* the administration pressured the top-tier decision-making sovereigns to support their agenda preferences (Haar, 2010: 967). The key example of this is Wolfowitz using the September 15 2001 Camp David meeting to persuade Bush's national security team to preemptively strike Iraq (Woodward, 2002: 83). They also utilised their access to insider resources: Feith's Office of Special Plans sought raw intelligence to support the claim that Saddam was linked to 9/11 (Tenet, 2007: 348). This intelligence was then disseminated through the neoconservative network *outside* the administration to create an atmosphere conducive to the neoconservative agenda (Pillar, 2006). They dominated the political discourse with their discursive strategies, manipulating the fearful post-9/11 climate to amplify their rationale for war in Iraq through an apocalyptic binary of good versus evil (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 182-96). Academic neoconservative outlets were used as credible mouthpieces through which to convert this rationale into conventional wisdom: the PNAC letter to Bush on September 20th demanding regime change in Iraq as part of the war on terror as one example (2001).

The definitive proof of the success of this agenda implementation is Bush's National Security Strategy (NSS), characterised as the 'quintessentially neoconservative document' (Boot, 2004; Schmidt and Williams, 2008). Bush's premise that America must 'build and maintain our defenses beyond challenge' echoes the neoconservative advocacy of 'precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor', as enunciated in their Defense Planning Guidance (2002: 29; 1992: 4). His vow to 'deter and defend against the threat before it is unleashed' embraces the pre-emptive 'teeth' of neoconservative foreign policy, whilst his rhetorical emphasis upon substituting terror with liberty and democracy exudes the optimistic Wilsonianism of neoconservatism (2002: 2-14). Finally, his decision to situate Iraq as the first target of U.S. pre-emption proves to many that the neoconservative agenda had become fully operational within the Bush administration; the Iraq invasion was their 'crowning achievement' (Ikenberry, 2004: 7).

Although this policy shift is undoubtedly favourable to neoconservative interests, blaming the neoconservatives as the primary architects of the Bush doctrine undermines the intellectual dominance of the real founders of post-9/11

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policy, including Bush himself. Although Mazarr and Haar emphasise Bush's agency by arguing that he was a key policy entrepreneur, *situating* Bush's agency *within* their neoconservative agenda setting frameworks serves only to *detract* from Bush's agency (2007: 17; 2010: 984). Haar subordinates him into a secondary role in relation to the neoconservative *drivers* of foreign policy: 'Bush adopted the neoconservative plan because first, the shocking events of 9/11 made the president *more receptive* to neoconservative ideas, and second, because neoconservatives effectively *facilitated* the conversion of his thinking' (my emphasis, 2010: 984). She does the same to Cheney and Rumsfeld; through characterising them as neoconservative *allies*, neoconservatives retain the dominant agency. Moreover, the prerequisite for accepting this dominant neoconservative agency is believing that 'Bush did not enter the White House with a fully scripted playbook', and as such there was a policy vacuum post-9/11 for the neoconservatives to jump into (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 131). By this logic, Bush and his clique practice a secondary role because they lacked an appropriate worldview. Yet this hugely understates the intellectual currents of these key players and their well-established worldview.

The post-9/11 foreign policy created by Bush and his clique was determined by their pre-9/11 worldview; the crucial point here is that none of these top tier administration officials were neoconservatives. Bush was a 'pragmatist who makes decisions less on a coherent ideological position than on time, circumstance, and the individual merits of the case' (Boyle, 2004: 87). He trusted his instincts, supported by advice from his small clique (Pfiffner, 2003). Rice had the most influence on Bush; her realist belief in the importance of U.S. power, as well as her emphasis upon U.S. values as universal, mirrored Bush's strong sense of U.S. exceptionalism, exacerbated by his religious convictions (2000). Cheney maintained unprecedented influence as Vice-President with the largest staff in history (Economist, 2007). His super-nationalism put him on the same militarist page as Bush and Rice, yet his pre-emptive and unilateral tendencies took him one step further. Powell and Rumsfeld complete the group, their huge influence predicated upon their experience as foreign policy titans. Rumsfeld shared Cheney's assertive nationalism and unilateral tendencies, whilst Powell was a proponent of militarism yet retained a multilateral streak. The clique's shared worldview promoted the belief that U.S. power and ideals are a force for good in the world, whilst simultaneously cradling the optimistic belief that the U.S. is growing stronger (Mann, 2004: xvi).

This outlook only grew stronger after 9/11. The grand strategy transformation they adopted was a new approach to terror, however was a natural extension of their existing intellectual currents. Bush's 9/11-induced 'drain the swamp of terror' instincts enlarged U.S. national security interests, whilst rendering containment and deterrence futile as counter-terror concepts. Yet the confidence to conceptualise the problem in this way was based upon Bush's pre-existing belief in U.S. exceptionalism. His militarist instinct for America to create a balance of power through kicking 'some ass', whilst simultaneously promoting freedom over terror, was underpinned by his reaffirmed messianic faith in America's military and values (2011: 128; Rice, 2002). Rice shared these instincts; her realisation of the need for America to draw on its primacy to reconceptualise its strategic direction away from containment in a post-9/11 world enshrined pre-emptive militarism and the promotion of liberty at the heart of the NSS (Lemann, 2002). 9/11 instilled in Cheney the fear that the next attack on America 'could involve far deadlier weapons than the world has ever seen'. Al-Qaeda records found in Afghanistan in November 2001 which revealed their aim to obtain WMD, as well as the October 2001 anthrax attack on America, vindicated this fear of the nexus between WMD and terror (Elliott and Carney, 2003). Iraq's alleged WMD possession thus made it the first target of pre-emption.

Even if one accepts Bush and his clique as the drivers of foreign policy, it can be argued that they were honorary practitioners of neoconservatism, given the similarities between the two (Krauthammer, 2005). Yet this disregards the tenets of the Bush doctrine that contradict neo-conservatism. Powell's influence on Bush to implement the Bush doctrine through cooperation with allies and the UN is a violation of neo-conservatism's unilateralism. Secondly, although Bush's values-based rhetoric embraced neo-conservative Wilsonianism, this rhetoric did not match the policy that followed. Rumsfeld's disdain for nation-building in Iraq, articulated through his assertion that 'we couldn't do it for them', translated into the light footprint military strategy that set aside little resources for building a successful prototype for Middle Eastern democratisation (2011: 483). Rice explains this decision: 'we do not seek to impose democracy on others, we seek only to help create conditions in which people can claim a freer future for themselves' (2002). The neo-conservative desire to insert Chalabi as the head of Iraq was rejected by Bush on the advice of Powell (Drew, 2003). Bush and his clique did not extend their doctrine to complete neo-conservative thought, rejecting both their unilateral teeth and their Wilsonianism. At best the Bush administration were half-hearted

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practitioners of neo-conservatism.

This is not to deny that neoconservatism played a role in the post-9/11 policy shift. A more appropriate analysis of neoconservatism's role in post-9/11 foreign policy would be to consider their presence *outside* the administration (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003: 15). Their network in the media and academia advanced the threads of debate Bush had set in motion; the aforementioned overlap between their interests and Bush's policy caused their unwavering support for the Iraq war. It is important to emphasise the focus here: *Bush and his clique had allies* in the neoconservatives over some parts of their policy, the AEI as an example. This support contributed towards the echo chamber of intellectual encouragement that the administration needed to work an attack on Iraq as a justified response to 9/11 into conventional public wisdom. These neoconservatives were not important enough to dictate policy, yet their ideas had consequences by tipping the public debate in favour of an Iraq invasion (Kurth, 2006: 767). Ultimately Bush and his clique *drove* foreign policy, whilst neoconservatism played a secondary role through their intellectual support for this policy.

A pre-emptive strike on Iraq as part of the justification for 9/11 was a controversial policy shift which spawned the accusation that a coterie of neoconservatives jumped into the policy vacuum created by 9/11, enacting their long-cherished agenda of a pre-emptive strike on Iraq. The evidence for this is seen in the Wilsonianism with teeth elements of the Bush doctrine. Yet the proponents of this argument misrepresent the primary intellectual currents behind the Bush doctrine. By portraying the neoconservatives as the *primary drivers* of foreign policy in their agenda-setting framework, they force Bush and his top-tier clique into a secondary role. This disregards their well-established worldview that provided the real foundation of the NSS. Furthermore, this focus fails to account for the tenets of Bush's strategy that violated neoconservatism. These violations characterise the Bush doctrine as half-hearted neoconservatism at best. Ultimately Bush and his clique were the primary drivers of post-9/11 foreign policy, with neoconservatism playing a secondary role as their intellectual allies. The coterie of neoconservatives caricature profoundly overstates the role of neoconservatism in post-9/11 foreign policy.

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Date written: May 2015*