

English Abstract

Hijacking the President? The Neoconservatives and the Decision for the Iraq War 2003

Ingrid Ross

Many commentators have blamed the perceived paradigm change in American foreign policy on the neoconservatives' increased influence within the George W. Bush administration. In her daily column in the *New York Times*, Maureen Dowd asks: "Does Mr. Bush ever wonder if the neocons duped him and hijacked his foreign policy?"¹ Most American commentators were surprised by the sudden rise of the neoconservatives within administration circles.² European commentators were more alarmed and even horrified by their observations. The French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* described the neoconservative intellectuals as ideologues of a new American empire.³ The German magazine *Spiegel* reported that the neoconservatives were a "conspiracy group, a small, elitist order that leads the way and, where necessary, provides a good conscience."⁴ The author identified members of the White House, the Pentagon and also judges from the highest ranks of the Supreme Court as members of this group.

The fact that the European perspective exaggerates the conspiratorial character could be attributed to the perceived radical change of American foreign policy since the Kosovo intervention in 1998, which was beyond the comprehension of many Europeans: most Europeans approved of the liberal internationalism of the Clinton era sanctioning the use of military means for humanitarian missions. While they favored international institution building the majority of Europeans observed with great regret the unilateralist reflex the George W. Bush administration displayed during the first nine months. The administration's post-9/11 interventionism, with strong moral implications that made use of "coalitions of the willing", was met with distrust and repudiation in Europe. The myth of a neoconservative "take-over" of US foreign policy seemed to provide a very logical explanation for this fundamental change.

¹ Maureen Dowd, "From Swagger to Stagger," *New York Times*, 7 September 2003.

² Elizabeth Drew, "The Neocons in Power," *The New York Review of Books*, 12 June 2003.

³ Quoted in: Joshua Muravchik, "The Neoconservative Cabal," *Commentary Magazine*, September 2003, 26.

⁴ Gerhard Spörl, "Die Neo-Konservativen," *Der Spiegel*, 4 August 2003, 142.

Many authors, who can be seen as part of the neoconservative network, have tried to play down the importance of their influence. Their methods have included self-irony, as exemplified by the caricature in the *Weekly Standard*. Irving Kristol, the self-named “godfather of neoconservatism”, took the claim of Howard Dean that “the president had been captured by the neoconservatives around him”, as an occasion to define neoconservatism.⁵ Max Boot, another neoconservative intellectual of a younger generation, tried to prove the most common accusations wrong in his article, “Think Again: Neocons”. He challenged allegations that neoconservatives were Jews who would only act to defend the interest of Israel; that the neoconservatives were a well organized, well funded conspiracy group and that neoconservatives were opposing multilateralism.⁶ In his article “The Neoconservative Cabal”, Joshua Muravchik also attempted to explain the influence of the neoconservatives on the George W. Bush administration’s foreign policy. He points out that the administration has followed the neoconservative direction in some foreign policy areas, but he also suggests that the President would have come to the same conclusions without the presence of neoconservatives among his advisors. Muravchik claims that only the memoirs of the president could give a definitive answer to this question.⁷

WHAT IS A “NEOCONSERVATIVE”?

This discussion illustrates that it is necessary to first define the term “neoconservative” that is being used increasingly on opinion pages on both sides of the Atlantic. The term “neoconservative” goes back to a group of dissidents in the Democratic Party in the 1960s and 70s, who were called so by their opponents in the Democratic Party. At the time their criticism focused primarily on domestic issues, whereas in the present political debate, the term is used only for adherents of a foreign policy concept. After the defeat of the “evil empire” and the end of the Cold War, several intellectuals called for the US to use its unrivaled power to advance national interests on the international stage.⁸ The spread of democratic values was to provide for peace and stability in the international system, according to their theory.⁹ This worldview, marked by traits of Wilsonianism¹⁰, is also described as “democratic globalism” by the pundit Charles Krauthammer.¹¹ But while President Woodrow Wilson relied on international norms and institution-building

⁵ Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion: What it was, and what it is,” *The Weekly Standard*, 25 August 2003, 23-25.

⁶ Max Boot, “Think Again: Neocons,” *Foreign Policy* (104), 2004, 20-28.

⁷ Muravchik, “The Neoconservative Cabal,” 33.

⁸ For example: Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70 (1), 1990/1991; William Kristol und Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 75 (4), 1996.

⁹ This conviction can also be found among proponents of Democratic Peace Theory: Christopher Layne, “Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace,” *International Security* 19 (2), 1994.

¹⁰ The term Wilsonianism refers to a vision of international order that is based on peace, democracy, and free trade. The underlying principles were put forward in a fourteen-point program at the end of the First World War in 1918 by President Woodrow Wilson.

¹¹ Charles Krauthammer, *Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World*, Washington, D.C.: The AEI Press, 2004.

to foster an international environment of peace and stability, the neoconservatives today have lost faith in the enforceability of international norms and put *realpolitik* into the foreground using military means.¹²

ASSESSING THE NEOCONSERVATIVES' INFLUENCE

This paper examines the extent of neoconservatives indeed had such an influence on Bush's decision to go to war against Iraq in 2003. Was this influence indeed great enough to warrant talk of a "hijacked president"? The neoconservative policy network, whose members are partly officials in the George W. Bush administration and partly organized in think tanks, helped to put war against Iraq on the agenda in the global war on terrorism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. My recourse to policy network theory permits a systematic evaluation of the degree to which members share ideology, values and policy preferences and the frequency and quality of interaction between the members of the policy network. It serves as an explanatory model for the influence of its members on the policy outcome, in this case the regime change in Iraq by military means. William Kristol, Robert Kagan and Paul Wolfowitz share the same normative beliefs and a high level of interaction can be observed among them. They can therefore be seen as the center of the neoconservative policy network. The decision making process for the Iraq war, however, has been dominated by Richard Perle, Chairman of the *Defense Policy Board* and the neoconservative Pentagon official Douglas Feith. They both disagreed with some aspects of the ideology of the *democratic globalists*, but can still be seen as part of the neoconservative policy network. After the end of the Cold War, the neoconservatives adopted a foreign policy agenda aimed to promote democracy throughout all regions of the world under US hegemony, while Pentagon officials especially focused on the Middle East region.

According to a definition by Max Weber, power consists of a person's opportunity within a social relationship to impose his own will on another person even against his resistance, no matter what this opportunity is based upon.¹³ In other words, evidence of influence could be witnessed in the persuasion of a person to act in a way he would not have acted otherwise. This means that the neoconservatives' influence can only be accurately measured if it could be shown how President George W. Bush would have acted had the neoconservatives not strongly promoted a military intervention against Iraq. This leads to a highly problematic counterfactual line of argument that is impossible to prove empirically. However, it is conceivable that the administration might have had other motives for a regime change in Iraq: economic interests in the Gulf region, strategic concerns about the military presence in Saudi Arabia, humanitarian motives or even personal motives of revenge, since Saddam Hussein's stooges tried to kill George W. Bush's father in 1993. But whatever the motives, the neoconservatives were successful in achieving one clear objective on their agenda, namely regime change in Iraq by means of military intervention.

¹² Kristol, "The Neoconservative Persuasion: What it was, and what it is," 24.

¹³ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, 5., rev. Ausgabe, Tübingen: Mohr, 1980, 28.

The neoconservatives influenced policy decisions by deliberately guiding the flow of information about 1) the Iraqi WMD program and 2) the connection between Saddam Hussein and the attacks of 9/11, not only to the President, but also Congress and the American public. While this paper focuses on the neoconservative policy recommendation of regime change in Iraq by military means, it is important to remember that the neoconservatives hadn't taken over the Bush administration's entire foreign policy after September 11, 2001 as some commentators have suspected. In other areas, such as North Korea and Iran, the administration has not followed the neoconservatives' policy recommendations.¹⁴ The analysis of the decision-making process from the neoconservative perspective also necessarily ignores the influence of other interest groups and policy networks that were simultaneously promoting a regime change in Iraq by military means.

The neoconservative influence on the administration's Iraq policy is put further into context when taking into account the favored strategy of Paul Wolfowitz and William Kristol (*The Project for A New American Century*); their push for the establishment of an enclave in the southern part of the country has not ultimately been implemented. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks were in charge of the military operational planning of the Iraq war, while the neoconservatives exerted more influence concerning the post-war reconstruction planning by setting up the Pentagon's *Office of Special Plans (OSP)*. But by relying on information from the *Iraqi National Congress*, the neoconservatives were predicting a post-war scenario that was not very realistic: Iraqis would welcome the liberation through US forces and deal in a peaceful and respectful manner with their newly won freedom. To this day, fundamentalist forces still conduct a guerilla war against US-led troops and the Iraqi administration in Baghdad, so that the perspective of the Iraqi people living together peacefully as a precondition for democracy is rather dim. After the regime in Baghdad fell in April 2003, looting and chaos took hold of the city, which can mainly be attributed to insufficient planning of the OSP.

While these developments have put the neoconservatives into the spotlight, the central question about America's role in the world still remains unanswered. As the 2004 election campaign has shown, there still is no consensus – neither among the American public nor administration officials, let alone the different parties – as to what kind of responsibility or obligation the overwhelming military power of the US entails. In his article, "The neoconservative moment", Francis Fukuyama has summed up the lessons learned for the neoconservatives as follows:

The United States should understand the need to exercise power in pursuit of both its interests and values, but also to be more prudent and subtle in that exercise. The world's sole superpower needs to remember that its margin of power is viewed with great suspicion around the world and will set off countervailing reactions if the power is not exercised judiciously.¹⁵

¹⁴ James Fallows, "Blind Into Baghdad," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jan/Feb 2004, 53-74.

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, "The Neoconservative Moment," *The National Interest* 76, 2004, S. 66 f.

It remains to be seen if the neoconservatives, who were called “liberals mugged by reality” during the 1970s, will become “neoconservatives mugged by reality” after their misjudgment in Iraq.

STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

The fact that there is no consistent definition of neoconservative ideology poses a central problem in dealing with the research literature. As a result of varying definitions, the assessment of neoconservative influence leads to different conclusions. In the first chapter, therefore, I establish a definition of neoconservatism and neoconservative actors, examining the origins of the intellectual tradition and their continuities with the *democratic globalists*. The first generation of neoconservatives, united by their staunch anticommunism, bear a great similarity to the second generation during the 1990s, who put American hegemony and the spread of American values at the heart of their considerations; both groups emphasize the importance of values and morale in foreign policy.

The second chapter analyzes the neoconservative policy network which developed during the years of the Clinton administration and gained significance through George W. Bush’s patronage decisions after he won the 2000 presidential election. The concept of policy networks established by a shared ideology and institutionalized interaction between members, functions as an explanatory model for the influence on policy output. The neoconservative policy network with the goal of regime change in Iraq consists of concentric circles, where those around William Kristol can be seen as the ideological center. Other members of the policy network share the same policy goal, but for slightly different motives.

The third chapter puts the neoconservative ideas into perspective with regard to the members of the Bush administration and examines their impact on the decision to go to war against Iraq in 2003. According to the premises of presidential politics, political decisions are influenced by individual worldviews on the one hand and the president’s governing style on the other hand. I therefore examine President Bush’s worldview and those of his cabinet level advisors. Since President Bush had little knowledge of and only limited experience in foreign policy at the time of his inauguration, the worldview of his advisory team, also called “the Vulcans”, deserve close inspection.

The decision to go to war against Iraq will function as an empirical case study for the neoconservatives’ influence. The fourth chapter presents an analysis of the policy process – agenda setting, policy formulation, policy implementation and evaluation – focusing on the agenda setting and policy formulation stages. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 the neoconservatives were able to push their agenda of regime change in Iraq into the foreground. The government’s reaction to 9/11 took shape as a global war on terrorism and a long-term reorientation of the foreign policy strategy as laid out in the National Security Strategy in 2002. The perceived danger of terrorist groups gaining possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) helped to advance the notion that regime change in Iraq was a priority on the agenda in the “war on terror”.

Neoconservative think tanks were encouraged by the George W. Bush administration to rally public support for regime change in Iraq by means of military intervention.

The available research literature has been supplemented by interviews with a variety of members of the neoconservative network from the think tank community, US administration officials, political scientists from academia, as well as critical voices from foreign policy experts in Washington D.C. and New York. These interviews were conducted in February and March 2004 focusing on the definition of neoconservatism, the identification of the neoconservative network and their political agenda. This paper draws on academic literature on President Bush's foreign policy, published mostly before July 2004.