

BOOKS

[*America Alone: Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order*, Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, Cambridge University Press, 382 pages]

The Neo World Order

By Scott McConnell

IN THE CENTURY that stretches before us, historians are likely to take as much interest in the months following Sept. 11, 2001, as past scholars have in those preceding August 1914. By the close of 2001, the Bush administration had decided to break off the assault on those who carried out the 9/11 atrocity and shifted course towards attacking Iraq, allegedly a “state sponsor” of terrorism. This decision precipitated a chain of events that we have entered but whose end we cannot foresee. But the first fruits are plain enough: a United States cut off from its democratic allies of long standing and disliked in world opinion as never before, a U.S. Army stretched to its limits by Iraq occupation duty, the main perpetrators of 9/11 still at large, Iraq a bleeding sore of insurgency that has become a main recruiting argument for anti-American Islamists. Recent Bush administration warnings of possible future attacks on the U.S. demonstrate that the president’s policies have not appreciably weakened al-Qaeda and may have actually fortified the group.

Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke’s *America Alone* is one of the first book-length efforts to place the administration’s policies during that time in historical perspective. They focus on the neoconservatives, the group of policy intellectuals and publicists that before 9/11 had seemed only one conservative faction among many but that afterwards emerged as the animating force behind the Bush strategy, essentially hijacking

administration policy to carry out their own long sought-after goals. Despite the boldness of this thesis, the authors’ overall tone is cautious and scholarly: they are the anti-Michael Moore of Bush critics, moderately right-wing members in good standing of the Anglo-American foreign-policy establishment. (Halper is a Cambridge academic who served in the Nixon, Ford, and Reagan administrations, Clarke a former British diplomat now associated with the Cato Institute.)

Halper and Clark don’t have a magic key to explain how the hijacking was carried out; this is not the book where one will find out what prompted Richard Cheney to ensure that the Pentagon and the National Security Council were stocked with neocons in key positions, nor what Karl Rove or George W. Bush actually think of them, nor whether the president’s father voiced objections, or if he did what his son might have thought about those objections. But Halper and Clark do provide a thorough account of neoconservative doctrine—both of its openly stated rhetorical positions and its less publicly touted implications.

The neocon desire for the United States to invade Iraq is well documented; neoconservative groups and publicists had pressed for Saddam Hussein’s overthrow since at least 1997. Why? Clarke and Halper distill neoconservative foreign-policy doctrine to several tenets: the human condition can be defined as a choice between good and evil, and it is the moral imperative for the former to confront the latter; states are defined by military power and the readiness to use it; and ... they have a primary interest in the Middle East. (Indeed, the Middle East policy is the one area in the globe about which neoconservatives can be counted on to agree with one another.)

Surely there is some elusiveness to the formulation: why, a naïve reader might wonder, this special interest in the Middle East? Some pages later the authors write, “the reality is that ... the neoconservative globalist and idealistic trappings are little more than window dressing,” and actually their focus is

very narrowly limited to “the Middle East and military power, most of all military power in the Middle East.”

Is it not bit disingenuous not to mention Israel here? But of course, if one were to assert (it has been done before) that the neoconservative interest in the Middle East is motivated by a particular concern for Israel, accusations of trotting out the “dual-loyalty canard” would follow in short order. In this light, Clarke and Halper’s formulation is quite sensible: an interest in “military power and the Middle East” is an undeniable characteristic of the neocon position. Some pages later the authors conclude, or rather suggest, that neoconservatives felt that Israel was weakened by the *intifada*, and the United States needed to carry out a bold stroke to transform the Middle East. They mention that neoconservatives are opponents of the Mideast peace process (wryly noting that the people who argue America can solve virtually any problem in the world throw up their hands at the impossibility of giving the Palestinians a state) and that some Beltway neocon institutions—such as JINSA, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs—exist to tighten links between Israel and the American defense industry.

They also note, quite correctly, that neoconservatism is not a Jewish movement and is quite open to non-Jews. This is the kind of truth that may obfuscate more than it reveals. Certainly there is a core of the movement (somewhere between *Commentary* magazine and the *Weekly Standard* and Benjamin Netanyahu?), and it is hard to conceive of neoconservatism as a dynamic and cohesive force without its Jewish sensibility, roots, and its overriding concern with Israel’s wellbeing.

Moving from doctrine to history, they note that some felt neoconservatism was dying out as a distinct ideological force in the early 1990s after the Cold War had finished. Core neocon figures like Norman Podhoretz were writing the movement’s obituary. This is not quite right—there was a serious battle over immigration policy within the conservative

movement (the neocons favoring a relatively open-borders stance), and the claim that neoconservatism was “over” was bit of a tactical ploy: if neoconservatives had largely succeeded in making over the mainstream of American conservatism in their own image, they no longer needed to exist as a distinct faction.

But the neocons received (and may have needed) a major financial transfusion from Rupert Murdoch’s decision to back the creation of the *Weekly Standard* as a neoconservative journal, and Murdoch’s Fox News gave a range of neocon pundits a media platform that their rivals couldn’t match. Without Murdoch, neoconservatism would not have been so well positioned to make its way into the Bush administration—which affirms, perhaps, that neoconservatism really is not entirely Jewish in its important pillars. The role of the Australian-born magnate is a worthy subject for a great novel, for he is given to saying things in private that no neocon is likely to say. The important thing, however, is that he has unambiguously chosen neoconservatism as the ideological horse to back in the United States.

Halper and Clarke remind us that the first generation of neoconservative eminences was a brilliant lot—top scholars or extremely well-rounded intellectuals (Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel P. Moynihan, Nathan Glazer). Their successors (Bill Kristol, John Podhoretz, Douglas Feith) are by contrast facile polemicists or skilled bureaucrats. This is not necessarily to say that the older generation was more moderate (though some, like Nathan Glazer clearly were) but they were certainly more interesting.

And yet the younger generation has achieved a kind of power of which their parents could hardly dream. This is in great part due to the rise of conservative mass media: in a time of national crisis, it is more important to be able to lay out talking points that will be repeated over and over by various “experts” on Fox News than it is to compose an essay laced with elegant aphorisms for *Partisan Review* or the *Public Interest*.

America Alone has a strong chapter on the role of mass media after 9/11, explaining how much of the conservative press was turned into an echo chamber of neocon arguments asserting that Iraq was inextricably bound up in the War on Terror—though there was no real evidence for it. It is not surprising to learn that Fox News was particularly effective in disseminating information that simply wasn’t true: regular viewers of Fox were far more likely than fans of other networks to believe that evidence of links between Iraq and al-Qaeda had been found, that weapons of mass destruction had been discovered in Iraq, or that world public opinion supported the Bush invasion. Fox viewers were three times more likely than viewers of other networks to believe all three of these things. Yet Fox was hardly uniquely culpable—there was, by 2001, an entire web of conservative media outlets devoted to priming their audiences to support a war plan built on a longstanding neocon target list. After 9/11, the country seemed in thrall to an entire discourse. “Seemingly out of nowhere,” Clarke and Halper write, “Iraq was represented as an immediate danger to America The neoconservatives linked their preexisting agenda (an attack on Iraq) to a separate event (9/11) and thus created an entirely new reality. It was like attaching a line of railroad cars to a locomotive of which they were the secret drivers.”

Clarke and Halper have written an extremely useful book. One can quibble with some of their points or smile at the caution of some of their formulations. They make at least one odd factual error, asserting that “Straussian” Werner Dannhauser became editor of *Commentary* after Norman Podhoretz’s retirement—the sort of mistake that old-fashioned “pre-Internet” historians would never make. But the authors have quite rapidly digested and made sense of a huge amount of material on neoconservatives and reached bold conclusions. Anyone seeking to understand the turn American foreign policy has taken in the past three years will need to come to terms with their arguments. ■

[*Bergdorf Blondes*, Plum Sykes, Miramax, 320 pages]

Heroine Chick

By Dana Vachon

PEOPLE KEEP SAYING the nastiest things about Plum Sykes’s debut novel, *Bergdorf Blondes*. They say that the work lacks winning characters and plot. A cruel few have even taken it upon themselves to point out that there is no character development. This seems hardly worth mentioning in a book already noted for its lack of plot and characters; there is really nothing here to develop, and still less of nothing to develop that nothing with. One by one the critics have damned *Bergdorf Blondes* to the lowest cantos of literary hell, that moth-ridden steppe where the Dewey Decimal system means nothing and J.D. Salinger rolls forever in a tub of Ben-Gay with Joyce Maynard.

If the many writers of chick literature were all Amish (which is just the case in at least one far-off parallel universe) this book would be an eleven-fingered child incapable of farm work. *Bergdorf Blondes* is cursed with the worst traits of its genre and blessed with no finer attributes. Still, it sells. Across the country chiseled Johnnies and willing Janes place it on beach towels as they rub coconut oil into one another’s firm skin, then sit down to let Ms. Sykes’s prose pass through their minds as effortlessly as the sand sifts between their toes. This is because, without knowing it, Plum Sykes has created a work that speaks to people. This is no ordinary beach read but an entirely unintended bourgeois *Odyssey*.

The book is most damnable and notable for its protagonist, a nameless non-character. No one in her world addresses her by name. She is similarly a stranger to herself, and goes only by “Moi.” It is easy to take Moi to task for her lack of motivation, conflict, background, and growth. Yet in a delicious sense it is these very shortcomings that make her an improbable modern heroine.