

# Kristol Reflections

How the neocon godfather rewrote the American Right

By Daniel McCarthy

WHEN IRVING KRISTOL died on Sept. 18, neoconservatism lost more than just its “godfather.” It lost its most unabashed exponent, “a true, self-confessed—perhaps the only—neoconservative,” as he described himself in the title of a 1979 essay. Others of his persuasion have disclaimed the label, coined as a reproach by the socialist Michael Harrington. But Kristol embraced it. Indeed, he expanded on it, explaining in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* that he had always been a “neo” of one kind or another: “a neo-Marxist, a neo-Trotskyist, a neo-socialist, a neoliberal, and finally a neoconservative.”

After the Bush years, during which defenders of the administration insisted that anyone who spoke of “neoconservatives” really meant “Jews,” it is refreshing to return to Kristol’s frank self-description. He was not coy about his influences, either: he wrote that after Marxist philosopher Sidney Hook, “the two thinkers who had the greatest subsequent impact on my thinking were Lionel Trilling and Leo Strauss.”

He was comfortable with his radical past. “I don’t really mind when some journalist, even ... a half-century later, casually refers to me as an ‘ex-Trotskyist.’ I regard myself as lucky to have been a young Trotskyist and have not a single bitter memory.” He had personal as well as ideological reasons for feeling that way, for it was through the Young People’s Socialist League that the 20-year-old Kristol met his wife-to-be, Gertrude Himmelfarb. “She had a trim figure and a strong, handsome face that radiated intelligence and sensibility,” he

recalled. Theirs was an old-fashioned courtship: “Many of the young Trotskyists were bohemian in their ‘lifestyles,’ but that was not for me. Trotskyist or no, radical socialist or no, I was bourgeois to the core,” he recalled. Therein lay the seeds of his future neoconservatism.

Kristol’s work as polemicist and public intellectual is best understood in light of his lifelong desire to be on the right side of the Left, first as an anti-Stalinist and Cold War liberal, later as a neoconservative. His battles were part of a civil war within American liberalism. If he and his allies later came to be called conservatives of some kind, it was not on account of any affinity with the historic American Right: “The traditional Republican party that was so alien to us was a party of the business community and of smaller-town America. It had, traditionally, little use for intellectuals ... it was still campaigning against the New Deal; and in foreign policy, its inclination was almost always isolationist.” But beginning in the 1960s, the defining issues in American elections would not be balanced budgets or the role of U.S. power in the world but questions of cultural identity. Kristol, an early critic of “the counterculture,” would find a welcoming home on the post-Goldwater Right. And once he did, he would help to complete the transformation of American conservatism into a populist anti-Left.

He was born in Brooklyn in 1920 to an Orthodox Jewish family that was not deeply religious or political. “I felt no passionate attachment to Judaism, or to Zionism, or even to the Jewish people,”

he recalled—though he got an early taste of Marxism from “the only magazine that entered our house ... *The New Masses*, to which my sister subscribed.” He acquired his love of ideological disputation from his years at City College of New York, where Alcove 1, the hang-out of Trotskyists and anti-Stalinist students, was the heart of his social life. The young radicals took their ideas, and those of their elders, very seriously. When James Burnham, then America’s leading Trotskyist theorist, spoke for only two hours during a two-day factional debate, the younger members considered him frivolous.

Kristol married soon after he left college. He spent a short time in Chicago, where his wife pursued graduate studies, before he was drafted into the Army. He saw combat in the European theater of World War II. “My wartime experience in Germany,” he recalled, had “the effect of dispelling any remnants of antiauthority sentiments ... that were cluttering up my mind. My fellow soldiers were too easily inclined to loot, to rape, and to shoot prisoners of war. Only army vigilance kept them in check.” He felt sympathy for the civilian population of the enemy nation: “observing German women and young girls, living among the rubble and selling their bodies for a few packs of cigarettes ... rid me of any anti-German feeling which, as a Jew, might otherwise have been present in me.” What’s more, “I was not so convinced that the American soldiers I knew were a different breed of humanity from their German counterparts.”

His career as public intellectual began

after his return from the war. First he wrote for *Commentary*, which he soon joined as an editor. In 1952, he scandalized the liberal intelligentsia by writing that Americans had good reason for supporting Sen. Joseph McCarthy's investigations. "There is one thing that the American people know about Senator McCarthy," he wrote, "he, like them, is unequivocally anti-Communist. About the spokesmen for American liberalism, they feel they know no such thing." The essay foreshadowed Kristol's next career move, which saw him become founding editor (with Stephen Spender) of *Encounter*, the London-based journal of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. *Encounter* and the Congress proved to be fronts for the CIA, intended to influence the European Left in a pro-American direction. When this became known years after Kristol had left *Encounter*, he denied having been aware of the agency's role—though one former CIA officer, Thomas W. Braden, referred in an apology in the *Saturday Evening Post* to "Another agent [who] became an editor of *Encounter*." Since neither Spender nor later editor Melvin Lasky fit the description provided by Braden, suspicion fell on Kristol. Had he been a CIA agent?

*Encounter* was the first of many journals Kristol would launch. In 1965, while working as an editor at Basic Books, he and his longtime friend Daniel Bell (another alumnus of Alcove 1) founded *The Public Interest*, a social-science quarterly for liberals disaffected with the Great Society. Twenty years later, Kristol and Australian political scientist Owen Harries debuted *The National Interest*, a journal with a foreign-policy emphasis to complement *The Public Interest*'s domestic focus.

*The Public Interest* marked the beginning of the technocratic, policy-oriented strain of neoconservatism. But at the same time, another, ultimately more influential variant was gestating. "After 1965, our

dissidence accelerated into a barely disguised hostility ... as the 'counterculture' engulfed our universities and began to refashion our popular culture," Kristol wrote. "In 1972, the nomination of Senator George McGovern, an isolationist and a candidate of the New Left, signified that the Democratic party was not hospitable to any degree of neoconservatism."

Only part of Kristol's vision was directed toward reforming the welfare state. The greater part was a culture war against enemies branded as—and who sometimes were—perverts, cowards, and America-haters. Kristol understood his ideology as "bourgeois populism" charged with a mission "to explain to the American people why they are right, and to the intellectuals why they are wrong."

McGovern, of course, lost in a landslide to Nixon in 1972, and the New Left never came close to wielding political power. Subsequent Democratic presidents—Carter, Clinton, and now Obama—would prove as patriotically bellicose as ever Harry Truman or JFK had been. And while popular culture would never revert to the bourgeois morality that prevailed before the 1960s, its condition for good or ill had little to do with the political efforts of liberals or conservatives. Yet the culture war proved a highly effective vehicle for mobilizing new political constituencies—in the case of the GOP, most notably Evangelical Christians—and Kristol had picked what, from 1972 to 2004, was more often than not the winning side.

This was truly a new conservatism. "In economic and social policy, it feels no lingering hostility to the welfare state, nor does it accept it resignedly, as a necessary evil," Kristol wrote in *Reflections of a Neoconservative*. His ideology sought not to "dismantle the welfare state in the name of free-market economics but rather to reshape it so as to attach to it the *conservative* predispositions of the people."

The neoconservative approach to for-

eign policy was quite different from traditional conservatism as well:

Neoconservatism is not merely patriotic—that goes without saying—but nationalist. ... Neoconservatives believe ... that the goals of American foreign policy must go well beyond a narrow, too literal definition of "national security." It is the national interest of a world power, as this is defined by a sense of national destiny, that American foreign policy is about, not a myopic national security.

In the abstract, this creed is difficult to distinguish from Cold War liberalism. But it is not at all difficult to distinguish from the principles of a Russell Kirk or a Barry Goldwater. The triumph of neoconservatism meant the displacement of the old conservatism by a moderate liberalism that was conservative only in its attitude toward the counterculture. (And even there, the Old Right had more than a little in common with the New Left—Kirk felt some affinity for Paul Goodman and the bourgeois radical Eugene McCarthy; Goldwater's old speechwriter Karl Hess became a leading countercultural libertarian.)

Following Gerald Ford's defeat in 1976, Kristol came to believe "that the Republican party would have to become more than the party of a balanced budget if it was to be invigorated." He spent the 1976-77 academic year in residence at the American Enterprise Institute, where he discovered the economic formula he was searching for—supply-side—thanks to another AEI fellow, Jude Wanniski:

Jude had tried very hard to indoctrinate me in the virtues of this new economics, with partial success: I was not certain of its economic merits but quickly saw its political possibilities. To refocus Republi-

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[The Israel Test by George Gilder]

# Chosen People

How to atone for being a WASP

By Scott McConnell

MEASURED IN TERMS of military dominance, Israel has never been stronger. But Israel's campaigns against its Arab neighbors no longer receive the international applause they once did. Many Europeans consider Israel a regional bully. Even in the United States, a recent essay in the *New York Review of Books* argued that a state grounded in ethnicity is an anachronism, a throwback to the ethnonationalism that the West sought to transcend after World War II.

In the realm of soft power, Israel finds itself somewhat beleaguered, with its cultural and economic exports facing incipient boycotts and its military actions scrutinized and rigorously condemned by prestigious international jurists. Among gentiles, Israel's strongest support comes from Christian Zionists, but the country's more sophisticated enthusiasts recognize that Armageddonite eschatology is not a solid foundation from which to ensure Washington's unconditional backing.

To Zion's rescue comes George Gilder, veteran luminary of the American Right, author of a successful polemic against feminism and a Reagan-admired ode to the free market, and publisher of a newsletter touting technology stocks. *The Israel Test* is in many respects a crackpot work, but it is more original than most contemporary political best-sellers, and it is bold.

Some mainstream conservative magazines have dutifully reprinted excerpts, and a few right-wing bloggers have praised the book. Still, one senses hesi-

tation: is this an argument conventional Republicans really want to embrace?

Stripped to its basics, Gilder's book attempts to view the Arab-Israeli conflict through the prism of the scientific and racist thought influential in Europe and America in the first decades of the last century. By the 1920s, scientific racism was already facing intellectual resistance, perhaps most insistently from Catholics such as Hilaire Belloc, and its later association with Nazism eventually brought about its near complete demise. A generation before Hitler, Madison Grant, then scientific racism's most prominent American exponent, had been a friend of presidents and a stalwart of the Eastern establishment. He published *The Passing of the Great Race* in 1916 to wide readership and considerable acclaim. The "Nordics," claimed Grant, had given the world most of its explorers and leaders, the organizers of great endeavors. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine how an Anglo-Saxon might survey the world early in the last century, observe where its most fertile centers of economic, scientific, and technological innovation were located, and construct a plangent theory about endangered Nordic superiority.

George Gilder takes this template and recasts it, deploying group IQ data that didn't exist in Grant's time. For Gilder, the superior men are not Teutonic explorers or generals but Jewish scientists and financiers. He takes a brief tour through the birth of quantum physics, the Manhattan Project, and the computer revolution and

finds Jews central at every stage. It is indisputably the case that in proportions much greater than their share of the population, the leading scientists and mathematicians of the 20th century have been Jewish. Half of them? Probably not. Over a quarter? Almost certainly. No surprise then that America won the race to build the first atom bomb with a boost from Jewish refugee scientists from Central Europe or that the computer revolution took off in a region congenial to Jewish talent and innovation—that is, California.

Gilder takes these facts, which are neither novel nor very carefully explored, and grafts them to an argument about Israel, the Middle East, and America's broader conflict with the Muslim world. At the core of this struggle, he sets his "Israel test." Is one able to admire and embrace Jewish superiority and creativity, or does one, out of envy, oppose it? This is the examination we all must face. The Nazis failed, of course, and so, he says, have the Arabs. Gilder does not concede that the anti-Semites of the past century were more likely to dwell on the prevalence of Jews in the upper echelons of Bolshevism than in the physics lab. Yet the envy that he describes has often been an unacknowledged part of their complaint.

In transporting his "Israel test" to the contemporary Middle East, Gilder runs awry. To pass the test, one must accept propositions held almost solely on the far Right of the Israeli political spectrum. He argues that no accommodation