

[breaking ranks]

# Where Have All the Neocons Gone?

Having wrecked the Right, will neoconservatives revert to their left-wing origins or double down on the GOP?

By Jacob Heilbrunn

AS BARACK OBAMA prepares to take the inaugural oath, it almost seems otiose to note that his victory represents a sweeping repudiation of the neoconservative movement. Though neocons such as Randy Scheunemann formed a kind of Praetorian Guard around John McCain during his presidential campaign, their truculent approach to foreign affairs sabotaged rather than strengthened McCain's electoral appeal. The best that Sarah Palin, a foreign-policy neocon on training wheels, could do was to offer platitudes about standing by Israel. It seems safe to say, then, that the neocon credo is ready to be put out to pasture.

Or is it? One problem with this line of argument is that it's been heard before—sometimes from the neoconservatives themselves. In 1988, after George H.W. Bush replaced Ronald Reagan, neocon lioness Midge Decter fretted, “are we a long, sour marriage held together for the kids and now facing an empty nest?” Then in the late 1990s, Norman Podhoretz delivered a valedictory for neoconservatism at the American Enterprise Institute. Neoconservatism, he announced, was a victim of its success. It no longer represented anything unique because the GOP had so thoroughly assimilated its doctrines. In 2004, a variety of commentators scrambled to

pronounce a fresh obituary for neoconservatism. The disastrous course of the Iraq War, *Foreign Policy* editor Moisés Naím said, showed that the neoconservative dream had expired in the sands of Araby.

Yet the neocons show few signs of going away. The Iraq surge was devised by Frederick Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute and spearheaded by William Luti, a protégé of Newt Gingrich and Dick Cheney who is currently at the National Security Council. Its success has prompted some neocons to claim vindication for the Iraq War overall. Nor has the network of institutions that the neocons rely upon melted away, from the Hudson Institute, where Scooter Libby and Douglas J. Feith are now ensconced, to the *Weekly Standard* and Fox News.

It's also the case that the realists inside the GOP feel more embattled than ever. Sen. Chuck Hagel has pretty much resigned from the GOP itself as well as from his Senate seat, denouncing Rush Limbaugh and others as retrograde conservatives. What's more, former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, who has co-authored a new book with Zbigniew Brzezinski about the challenges facing the next president, has been informally advising Obama. Scowcroft told CNN, “I think we devel-

oped in the Republican Party a—well, you know, the buzzword for it is ‘neoonism.’ But I think what it is, it's an ideology—it's really an idealistic approach to things. But it's a combination of idealism and, if you will, brute force.” As Scowcroft sees it, the neocons remain in control of the GOP. “Where do I go?” he recently asked me.

Still, if the neocons aren't necessarily on the ropes, it would probably be equally mistaken to deny that something has changed. They have undeniably suffered a number of setbacks. The sun has set on the flagship neocon newspaper, the *New York Sun*, a victim of the financial crash. The citadel of neoconservatism, AEI, has ousted Michael Ledeen, Joshua Muravchik, and Reuel Marc Gerecht. Meanwhile, Robert Kagan has incorporated realist tenets into his writings, while David Frum, who co-wrote with Richard Perle the standard neocon foreign-policy text, *An End to Evil*, and who previously demanded the expulsion of allegedly unpatriotic conservatives from the conservative pantheon (a move Russell Baker called reminiscent of the Moscow purges), now seems to be hinting at, among other things, a reassessment of neocon foreign policy. “I cannot be blind,” he conceded in a farewell address to *National Review Online* last month, “to the evidence ...

that the foreign policy I supported has not yielded the success I would have wished to see.”

Looking ahead, the neocons do not have an obvious horse. In the past they have glommed on to everyone from Sen. Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson to Colin Powell, whom William Kristol briefly touted for president. Another problem is that George W. Bush himself has increasingly deviated from neoconservatism. With the fall of Donald Rumsfeld, on whom the neocons tried to blame the mismanaged Iraq War, Vice President Dick Cheney has lost out to the combination of Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Even Kristol seems to have shed some of his habitual fervor, musing about the shortcomings of capitalism in his *New York Times* column and expressing the hope that Obama will put aright what has gone wrong.

#### LIKE NOT A FEW REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS THAT HAVE FALLEN ON HARD TIMES, NEOCONSERVATISM IS EXPERIENCING A SCHISM.

The result has been something of an identity crisis in the ranks of the neocons. Like not a few revolutionary movements that have fallen on hard times, neoconservatism is experiencing a schism. Two camps are starting to face off over the question of the true faith, with the first embracing orthodoxy and the second heresy. The question they face is simple: Should the neocons continue to move right, serving as the advance guard of an embattled GOP? Or should neoconservatism become true to itself by returning to the center? Will the movement, in fact, morph back into what it was at its inception in the late 1960s when it belonged firmly to the Democratic Party—moderate on domestic issues and mildly hawkish on foreign policy?

The orthodox camp is based mostly in New York. It wants to combat the decadent liberal elites—the new class—that are supposedly corrupting the Republic. It views Barack Obama as a dangerous, unreconstructed 1960s-type radical and pins its hopes on Alaska governor Sarah Palin. Writing in the November issue of the British neocon journal *Standpoint*, Midge Decter, for example, upbraids Palin critics for their unwillingness to recognize her brilliance. Decter, a longtime foe of the feminist movement, depicts Palin as someone of unalloyed virtue who incarnates the Victorian virtues celebrated by Gertrude Himmelfarb. According to Decter, Palin is “young, handsome, clever, firmly married, a mother, a serious Christian, a right-to-lifer who has been successful at virtually everything ... to which she has turned a hand or mind or body.” Obama, by contrast, offers “for those with ears

around elite universities since he was eighteen years old ...” And Podhoretz’s surprising conclusion? The election did not repudiate the notion that America is a center-right country.

The second and more novel camp consists of what might be called heretical reverts. Reverters dismiss the notion that America has not changed. One of the shrewdest and most perceptive neocons, Tod Lindberg of the Hoover Institution, noted in the *Washington Post*, “Here’s the stark reality: It is now harder for the Republican presidential candidate to get to 50.1 percent than for the Democrat.” The reverts—who include, among others, David Frum and David Brooks, and are largely based in Washington, D.C.—suggest that the GOP needs to get up to speed, to dump overboard the detritus that it has accumulated over the past several decades. They want no part of Sarah Palin, seeing her as a recipe for electoral disaster. They also see the fate of the British Tories, who have wandered in the wilderness for years, as a cautionary tale. The argument of the reverts, at bottom, seems to be that neoconservatism needs to reboot. Indeed, the reverts even seem to have discovered a new female savior—Hillary Clinton. And so, if neoconservatism has a future, it’s in the Democratic more than the Republican Party.

To understand this new development, it’s helpful to consider the arc of neoconservatism. In its original incarnation, neoconservatism’s salvation doctrine was to reconvert the Democratic Party to its anticommunist roots and a more sober view of social policy. Irving Kristol called for a “combination of the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal”—the notion that liberalism could conserve the best in conservatism. Former *Wall Street Journal* editor Robert Bartley, who did much to smooth the path of the neocons into the GOP, astutely observed in 1972 that the

neocons “are something of a swing group between the two major parties. Their political outlook is that of establishmentarians looking for an establishment worthy of the name, and many of them are longtime Democrats with new Republican leanings.”

There can be no doubt that as staunch cold warriors, or, if you prefer, liberal internationalists, the neocons viewed the Republican Party, which was led by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, both realists and promoters of détente, with unease. The neocons, who had started out as Trotskyists, espoused a social-democratic program in domestic policy. Essentially, they were Hubert Humphrey Democrats. The neocons clustered around Sen. Scoop Jackson, whose adviser was Richard Perle. They didn’t want détente with the GOP itself; they beseeched Democrats to decry their opponents as selling out human rights and American ideals.

Then came Jimmy Carter. Despite Carter’s support for human rights abroad, the neocons bridled at his derogation of the communist threat and failure to support the shah of Iran from being overthrown by radical Islamists. The neocons became counterrevolutionaries. Their failure to create regime change in the Democratic Party meant that they began enlisting in the GOP. More precisely, they flocked to the banner of Ronald Reagan, a former New Deal Democrat turned conservative, or, in their eyes, the first neocon. Neocons such as Elliott Abrams and Jeane Kirkpatrick landed posts in the Reagan administration, but the true believers on the outside weren’t satisfied. Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Midge Decter all chided Reagan for his pragmatism. Podhoretz even condemned him for “appeasement by any other name” for his policies in the Middle East and toward the Soviet Union. Later, Podhoretz claimed that Reagan was suffer-

ing from delusions about the Cold War, indulging in the “fantasy of communist collapse.” Once the evil empire imploded, the neocons embarked upon the new project of reconciling Jews and evangelicals within the GOP.

Yet no matter how fervent their embrace of the GOP may have been, the neocons began to flirt with the Democratic Party once more when Bill Clinton was the nominee in 1992. This was the first sign of an alliance between the liberal hawks and neocons that would flourish during George W. Bush’s presidency. The neocons had found the realist George H.W. Bush wanting for his failure to topple Saddam Hussein, his attempts to curb Jewish settlements in the West Bank, his refusal to intervene in the Balkans, and his tepid response

ing abroad. The new Popular Front forged between the neocons and liberal hawks collapsed during the Iraq War, however, as liberals bailed out once the war went south.

Might there be a reunion, this time with the neocons courting the liberal hawks rather than the liberal hawks trying to court the neocons? The more conciliatory neocons have begun to send up signal flares. It isn’t simply David Brooks’s paeans to Obama. Robert Kagan has praised what he calls “Obama the Interventionist” in his *Washington Post* column: “Obama believes the world yearns to follow us, if only we restore our worthiness to lead. Personally, I like it.” Even the *Weekly Standard* has begun to reassess its seemingly intractable hostility to all

## THEY FLOCKED TO THE BANNER OF RONALD REAGAN, A FORMER NEW DEAL DEMOCRAT TURNED CONSERVATIVE, OR, IN THEIR EYES, THE FIRST NEOCON.

to Tiananmen Square. Clinton, by contrast, denounced the “butchers of Beijing” and seemed to offer the prospect of tough action in the Balkans against the Serbs. The refusal of Clinton to appoint any neocons, apart from providing Richard Schifter with the token position of assistant secretary for human rights, did little to maintain their ardor. Still, as Clinton’s second term neared its end, neoconservatives such as Norman Podhoretz, writing in *National Review*, assessed his tenure fairly favorably. As Podhoretz noted, Clinton had been no pushover: he intervened in the Balkans and launched missiles at Iraq. Moreover, he severely curbed welfare benefits. In short, the McGovern era had come to end with Clintonite centrism. It was realist Republicans, to the consternation of William Kristol and Robert Kagan, who were denouncing Clinton for interven-

things Clinton. Vigilant neocon-spotters will have noticed that the *Standard* featured not one but two items praising the idea of Hillary as secretary of state. The tone of both seemed to be “yes, we should.” Under the heading “Hail Clinton,” Michael Goldfarb, McCain’s deputy communications director during the campaign, blogged that she is “likely to be a nuisance to Obama whether she is inside or outside of his administration, but as our top diplomat she could reprise a role that made Powell a kingmaker in this year’s election. And perhaps she could even present the case for war with Iran to an insubordinate United Nations in the event that Obama’s personal diplomacy somehow fails to deter the mullahs from their present course.”

The *Standard*’s Noemie Emery went even further. In her view, “For the moment, Hillary Clinton will be the con-

servatives' Woman in Washington, more attuned to their concerns on these issues than to those of the get-the-troops-home-now wing of her party, a strange turn of events for a woman whose husband was impeached by Republicans just ten years ago, and whose ascent that party had dreaded since she went to the Senate two years after that." Indeed.

The fact is that the neocon passion for Hillary may not be as outlandish as it seems at first glance. For one thing, Hillary was instrumental in getting Madeleine Albright appointed secretary of state in 1997, and they remain close friends. Albright is a liberal interventionist of the first order. Her father, Josef Korbel, a former Czech diplomat, was a cold warrior. Albright herself ardently pushed for intervention in the Balkans, first as Clinton's United Nations ambassador, then, more effectively, as secretary of state. Albright will have the opportunity to weigh in on hot-button foreign-policy issues such as relations with Russia.

In addition, Albright, together with former Clinton defense secretary William S. Cohen, has headed a U.S. Institute for Peace and Holocaust Museum task force on genocide. Its new report, released on Dec. 8, is called "Preventing Genocide." It could prove almost as influential for the Obama administration as the neocon-inspired "Defense Planning Guidance" of 1992, which called for American unilateral domination of the world, was for George W. Bush's presidency. Albright and Cohen's document calls for the creation of an Atrocities Prevention Committee that would work with key national security officials. It further states that the director of national intelligence should "initiate the preparation of a National Intelligence Estimate on worldwide risks of genocide and mass atrocities." Finally, it recommends that the secre-

tary of defense and U.S. military leaders develop military guidance on genocide prevention and response and "incorporate it into Department of Defense (and interagency) policies, plans, doctrine, training, and lessons learned." The report's aims are noble, but it is essentially a stalking horse for liberal intervention. It would create a permanent bureaucracy with a vested interest in insisting upon armed interventionism whenever and wherever the U.S. pleases—the Congo, Georgia, Zimbabwe, Somalia, and so on.

Indeed, Hillary may appoint a number of liberal interventionists. Russia-expert Michael McFaul, a fellow at the Hoover Institution, is an adviser to Obama and is reportedly angling for the post of assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor. In 2007, writing in the *Washington Post*, together with Abbas Milani, McFaul argued, "the United States must recommit to a policy of encouraging democratization inside Iran, because only a democratic regime will stop supporting terrorist groups abroad and repression at home." McFaul also wants to push for democracy inside Russia. Another possible Clinton appointment might be Samantha Power, who has strenuously advocated more intervention backed by the United Nations. Power declared in *Time* in 2007 that as abuses mount in Burma and Darfur "a coalition of the concerned must insist that what is manifestly true of the economy is also true of human rights: in this age, there is no such thing as a purely 'internal matter.'" How far removed is this from Bush's rhetoric about freedom sweeping the globe in his second inaugural address?

Power's conclusion epitomizes the distinction between the liberal interventionists and neocons on one side and realists on the other. Realists tend to believe that the internal nature of a state

does not decisively affect its foreign-policy decisions. A democratic Iran might be no less likely than an authoritarian Iran to seek nuclear weapons. The country simply pursues its traditional national interests. Liberal interventionists take a different view. They want to expand democratic norms, by force if necessary, around the globe in the hopes of advancing the dream of a perpetual peace.

Whether or not Hillary actually behaves like a hawk in office is another question. She might seek to push peace talks on Israel and the Palestinians. Reaching an agreement with Iran would be a big feather in her cap. So would negotiating an arms-control deal with Russia in exchange for dismantling the Bush administration's proposed missile-defense system in Eastern Europe.

But the notion that Obama will seek to roll back the American empire is a pipedream. It wasn't McCain but Obama who declared on the campaign trail that America has to "lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good."

This won't prevent the unrepentant rump faction of the neocons from denouncing Obama as an appeaser, while looking to either Sarah Palin or Newt Gingrich as possible standard-bearers. But for now, the neocons tout-ing a reversion to the movement's original, more liberal precepts seem intent on creating a new chapter in the saga of a movement that has been repeatedly written off as dead. Perhaps reaching out to the Obama administration will help rejuvenate neoconservatism. It could prove to be a more comfortable fit than either side might anticipate. ■

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# Bailout Blago

The governor was too honest for Washington.

By Justin Raimondo

THE STONING of Rod Blagojevich recalls Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," a sinister short story about the inhabitants of an otherwise placid village where, periodically, someone's name is chosen out of a hat for a public stoning. Like much of Jackson's idiosyncratic fiction, a dark river of fear runs beneath the formal narrative—in this case fear of randomness, of sudden death at the hands of fate. It was, perhaps, Blagojevich's fate to go down in history as a symbol of political corruption, Chicago's Boss Tweed and the most infamous of mobster-politicians. Yet one can't help but think it could have happened to anyone—to any member of the political class, that is.

This scandal is noteworthy because of the honesty and purity of its protagonist, the Illinois governor who has become a leper in the political universe because he didn't deign to dress up his avarice and power-lust in the language of "public service" and altruism. With his fishwife of a first lady swearing in the background, the governor laid it all on the table, demanding cash for political favors, trying to sell Barack Obama's Senate seat to the highest bidder, and seeking to have members of the *Chicago Tribune's* editorial board fired as the price for state aid to the beleaguered Tribune Company. He was, in short, doing what all politicians do: dispensing favors to his supporters and punishing his enemies by withholding the same. "Why," asked H.L. Mencken, "should democracy rise against bribery? It is itself a form of wholesale bribery."

While the sale of Obama's Senate seat has garnered the lion's share of attention, the aspect of this case that gave rise to

the most unladylike language from Illinois's first lady—shocking our pious pundits and media bloodhounds—was the attempted firing of those troublesome *Tribune* editorial writers who had been crusading to get the governor impeached. In pitching a deal to the business side of the Tribune Company, Blagojevich rightly pointed out to the chief financial officer that, in granting state aid to bail them out, he would be doing precisely what the newspaper's editorial writers had cited as grounds for his impeachment: going around the state legislature and directly handing out cash.

The source of this largesse was to be the Illinois Finance Authority, whose website describes it as "a self-financed state authority principally engaged in issuing taxable and tax-exempt bonds, making loans, and investing capital for businesses, non-profit corporations, agriculture and local government units statewide." With "about \$3 billion in project financing" to hand out each year, it has approved 780 projects to the tune of \$11 billion to "stimulate the economy"—and, no doubt, to stimulate the bank accounts of the governor's friends. This is, in short, a local version of what President Obama is proposing as his first act: a \$2 trillion "stimulus package."

Everybody knows that this world-historic chunk of moolah is going to be handed out to the president's friends and that politics—not public interest—is going to be the rule of thumb in deciding on whom to lavish the loot. Paul Krugman worries that so much money will not find enough projects to fund, but he needn't worry: the Blagojeviches of this world will find endless uses for it.

This is why the Obama-ites are desperate to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Blagojevich. Their entire political program is about doling out rewards to interest groups that supported them during the campaign: union power, money power, and corporate media power that did so much to make Obama-mania politically chic. Their economic "stimuli" will re-energize the sagging political fortunes of Democratic machine politicians from coast to coast. The Illinois Finance Authority will no doubt scarf up more than its fair share to fund the extortionate activities of present and future Chicago mobster-politicians and their clones across America. Imagine clouds of flies over a gigantic pile of offal, and you've visualized the scene once the economy is properly "stimulated."

Not surprisingly, the Obama operative who most resembles a character out of "The Sopranos"—Rahm Emanuel—reportedly had 21 conversations with the Blagojevich gang, whose language he speaks fluently. This, after all, is a guy who once had a two-and-a-half-foot rotting fish delivered to an adversary, and famously, at a late night gathering with other Clintonistas the day after Bill was first elected, grabbed a steak knife, shouted out the name of someone on their enemies list, and slammed the blade into a table with full force, screaming, "Dead!"

Who knows what Rahm the Enforcer and Boss Blagojevich were chatting about while the FBI listened. You can bet it didn't have much to do with the public interest.

Another potential victim of Blago-gate is the sainted Jesse Jackson Jr., who met with the governor hours before the Don Corleone of Illinois politics was hauled off to the hoosegow by Fitz and the feds. A few months before, the network of East Indian businessmen who fund Jackson got together and decided to raise a million bucks for Boss Blago-