

## The Real Cabal

After nearly two decades of paleoconservative criticism, complaints, and general grouching about the ideological hegemony of the neoconservatives, the establishment press finally began to notice the existence of the latter. Between the time of President Bush's factually flawed "Axis of Evil" State of the Union Address in 2002 and the "end" of the war with Iraq last spring, probably a dozen articles about the neocons popped up in such locations as the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, the *New York Review of Books*, and similar organs. What was curious (though not terribly surprising) is that, although each of the articles offered an "exposé" of the neocon "cabal," its "extreme" views and beliefs, and its awesome power in the government, the academy, and the mass media, not a single article that I know of even mentioned the existence of something called *paleoconservatism* or cited or quoted any paleoconservative writer—even though the very term *neoconservative* logically implies a paleoconservative antithesis, and the hostile drift of the articles would seem to suggest that their authors would welcome such an alternative to the neocons as the "acceptable right."

This silence about the paleos was the result, in part, of the abysmal ignorance of the writers of most such articles but also of the hidden purpose that lurked beneath much of what they wrote. That purpose was not so much to "deconstruct" and "expose" the neocons as to define them as the real conservative opposition, the legitimate (though deplorable and vicious) "right" against which the polemics and political struggle of the left should be directed. The reason the left prefers the neocon "right" to a paleo alternative is, quite simply, that the neocons are essentially of the left themselves and, thus, provide a fake opposition against which the rest of the left can shadowbox and thereby perpetuate its own political and cultural hegemony unchallenged by any authentic right.

The strategy became fairly apparent in much of the liberal commentary about the disciples of the late Leo Strauss, the Straussians or, as the *New York Times Magazine* dubbed them, the "Leo-cons."

The "Straussians" soon began to displace such perennial demons of the left as Wall Street banks, oil companies, white supremacists, and fundamentalist Christians as the ultimate source of political evil, and one almost expected the witch hunters of the Southern Poverty Law Center to start profiling them.

The portrayal of the neocons in general and the Straussians in particular as the brains behind the American right became obvious in an article by William Pfaff in the *International Herald Tribune* (May 15), in which he wrote that "The radical neoconservatives, who appeared in the 1960s, are the first seriously intelligent movement of the American right since the 19th century" and "the main intellectual influence on the neoconservatives has been the philosopher Leo Strauss." Both statements are simply wrong.

In the first place, there is nothing especially "radical" about any of the neoconservatives, and, in the second place, even if we grudgingly grant that they are intelligent, they are clearly not the first to display this quality. Mr. Pfaff might have glanced at George Nash's *Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* to learn something about "intelligent" conservatism in this country or at any of the myriad books about the Southern Agrarians, the history and background of conservatism, etc. Obviously, however, he did not or had some other reason for wishing to present the neocons as the only adversaries worthy of the immense brainpower of the left.

In the third place, Strauss, while a major influence on several Old Right figures as well as on some neoconservatives (his picture appears on the dust jacket of Nash's 1976 book) and the founder of his own school of (sort of) conservative thought, is hardly "the main intellectual influence" on the neocons. Neoconservatism emerges from three originally separate movements, among which the Straussians are one. The other two are the liberal-to-left mainstream intellectuals of the 1950's, most of whom were at one time known as "consensus liberals," and the Social Democrats of the Sidney Hook stripe, who actually contributed



most of the anticommunism of the neocons. The former group "moved to the right"—if that is what they did—principally because the New Left slipped out of their control, started kicking them down the stairs (often quite literally), and snuffling up to the Palestinians against Israel. Unlike the anticommunist right that emerged a decade or more earlier (the right of Whittaker Chambers, James Burnham, and Frank Meyer), the neocon right experienced no dark night of the soul about the God That Failed and, in fact, never even missed a meal. So far from being Trotskyites (I know of only two or three major neoconservative figures who were), most were never committed to the revolutionary left at all and had little problem shuffling from one side of the spectrum to the other as the occasion required. I have never heard of any neocon who, like Chambers and Meyer, felt the need to stay up all night every night with a loaded shotgun in case some of his former comrades and employers in the NKVD came looking for him. The transition from whatever it was the neoconservatives formerly purported to believe to whatever it is they now purport to believe was no more wrenching a spiritual odyssey for them than a trip from Pinsk to Prague would be for an Eastern European peddler. Intellectual nomads by their very nature, they are as comfortable with one *ism* as with another.

As for Strauss, much of the accumulating literature about him and his disciples in the establishment popular press is also wrong. It is entirely untrue, for example, that the late Albert Wohlstetter of the University of Chicago, under whom neocons Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle studied, was a Straussian, nor is it true that Mr. Perle is a Straussian. (Both claims were made last spring.) Mr. Wolfowitz has had the reputation of being a Straussian

since at least the Reagan administration, though he rejects the label. Irving Kristol and his ubiquitous offspring Bill claim to reflect the influence of Strauss on their own thinking, but, as paleoconservative Paul Gottfried pointed out in what was probably the most sensible and accurate discussion of the Straussians this year (in the *American Conservative* in June), both Kristols took from Strauss what they wanted and cannot, in any serious sense, be described as his “disciples.”

Moreover, as Dr. Gottfried and a number of Old Right critics of the Straussians have argued for years, the Straussians are simply not very right wing at all—which is precisely why they are so acceptable to the neocons and also why the left is so eager to accept them as the legitimate right. According to William Pfaff and several others, the Straussians are really a kind of Masonic secret society who preach one doctrine to the masses but maintain among their inner circles an esoteric dogma that glorifies power, deception, and repression. Yet, whatever the truth of that claim, the real damage the Straussians inflict is not in what they secretly think but in what they publicly teach. As Dr. Gottfried writes, Strauss “aims his fire at ‘historicism,’ the belief that historical circumstances determine values” and attacks several major figures in European intellectual history known as conservatives, including Edmund Burke. The attack on “historicism” is intended to reject the Burkean appeal to tradition and to insist, instead, on classical natural law and the universal ethical absolutes it contains. While Strauss himself drew a major distinction between the natural-law teachings of classical and medieval philosophers and the theory of “natural right” espoused by modernist thinkers such as Locke, many of his disciples (Harry Jaffa comes to mind) seem to deny the distinction and adopt an antihistorical universalism based on natural rights that leads them to embrace what is, at bottom, the worldview of the left. It was, after all, from supposed universal natural rights that the slogan of the French Revolution, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” derived, and the Straussian adulation of Abraham Lincoln follows precisely from Lincoln’s regurgitation of such Jacobin bromides.

Another exposé of the Straussians, Jim Lobe, writing on *AlterNet.org* last May, while arguing that the Straussians secretly adhere to an atheistic and nihilistic creed, portrayed them as promoting the political and social usefulness of re-

ligion “because Strauss viewed religion as absolutely essential in order to impose moral law on the masses who otherwise would be out of control.” Irving Kristol, Mr. Lobe wrote,

has long argued for a much greater role for religion in the public sphere, even suggesting that the Founding Fathers of the American Republic made a major mistake by insisting on the separation of church and state.

It is not clear Kristol has ever argued that, but almost all Old Right and paleoconservative thinkers *have*, though most deny that the Framers really established a separation at all. Emphasizing the importance of religion in the public order is hardly unique to Straussians or neoconservatives.

A great deal of the recent commentary on the neoconservatives and the Straussians seems to miss what, in recent years, has been the major driving force in their political agenda—namely, their own Jewish identity. It is always difficult to bring this subject up without incurring the predictable accusations, but Jewishness (not necessarily the same as Judaism) has been at least as significant a factor in the shaping of the neoconservative mind as Roman Catholicism was in shaping the Old Right mind of *National Review* in the 1950’s. To discuss the one is no more antisemitic than discussing the other is anti-Catholic. Jewish identity obviously shapes neoconservative foreign policy toward Israel and the Arab states as well as their support for the globalization of “democracy,” “democratic capitalism,” and spreading American pop culture throughout the world. Neoconservative Jewish identity also undoubtedly shapes continuing neocon support for the civil-rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., and virtually all immigration (as a means of protecting against the emergence of anti-Jewish movements by diluting the Old Stock ethnic homogeneity of the United States; as Brandeis University President Earl Raab, speaking of the effect of mass immigration on the U.S. population and politics, remarked some years ago, “We have tipped beyond the point where a Nazi-Aryan party will be able to prevail in this country”). *Commentary* has published any number of articles over the years defending liberal immigration policies, but only since September 11, 2001, has it published any suggesting the need for any immigration restrictions at all—but only on Arab and

Muslim immigrants.

Yet it would be a serious error to see neoconservatism as a purely Jewish phenomenon. The presence within it of such non-Jews as Bill Bennett, Jack Kemp, Richard John Neuhaus, Michael Novak, Penn Kemble, and many others makes that clear enough, but so does the very success of the neocon movement. It did not succeed simply because a tiny “cabal” of Jews maneuvered themselves into positions of power. It succeeded because it performed certain functions and services for the non-Jewish conservatives and liberals who helped to push it and to give it credibility as a part of the American right. For the right, the main service neoconservatives performed was to lend it a certain respectability that the right generally lacked—not only through academic and literary credentials but in the general tone they adopted, a tone that contributes to William Pfaff’s sad delusion that the neoconservatives “are the first seriously intelligent movement of the American right since the 19th century.” Of course, it never dawned on the conservatives who welcomed them as allies, and soon as leaders, that the “respectability” the neocons brought them was one defined and conferred by the dominant left and therefore made it impossible for the right to challenge the left at all. Come to think of it, maybe the neocons are smarter than most on the Old Right after all.

And that is precisely the main function neoconservatism provides for the left—to serve as a political formula for preserving the New Deal-Great Society regime, even as the real conservatism began to rip it apart intellectually and to win political battles against it with Richard Nixon, George Wallace, and Ronald Reagan. The rise of neoconservatism has ensured that the liberal hegemony that should by now have been dismantled still thrives. There are zillions of non-Jews—blacks, Hispanics, and many, many non-Jewish whites—who have vested interests in making sure that hegemony is not endangered. Perhaps the most remarkable development in American political life in the late 20th century was that a small brigade of neoconservatives enabled them to preserve it.

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## The Perfect Storm

The chain saw screams as it hits the wood, then slides through the first few branches as if they were butter. I toss them aside, and Jacob and Stephen each grab hold of one, dragging it, struggling, over to the gate and out onto the driveway. It has been two weeks since the storm, but I hadn't been able to borrow a chain saw until yesterday; even now, the only ones on the shelves of the hardware stores are electric. Four days without power has convinced me that a noisy, smoky, gas-guzzling chain saw is the only way to go.

Here on East State Street, at our old house, city crews have already picked up the debris that our former neighbors had dragged to the curb. It's one of the few places in Rockford that seems to have returned to normal, as long as you don't glance up at the jagged tops of the trees lining the main east-west route through the Forest City. Keep your eyes on the ground, and the only sign of the storm is the occasional patch of dead grass between the sidewalk and the curb, turned brown and yellow by the weight of the debris—that, and the ever-increasing mound of branches in our driveway.

The storm had arrived around 4:17 A.M. on Saturday, July 5—not unexpectedly, but with a ferocity that no one could have predicted. I woke to the sound of the pounding rain, grabbed my glasses, and looked out of the third-story window at the foot of the bed. The constant lightning—a bolt every second or so—should have lit up the sky like daylight, but it took me a moment to realize that I couldn't see very far; the rain formed an impenetrable wall. Another moment, and I could make out the branches of our neighbors' towering oak, as they swung on an ever-increasing arc, ending their westward journey by slamming against the wall above and below the window. One more, and I was out of bed and down the stairs, away from the flailing oak and the huge, half-dead maple standing at the southwest corner of the house, right between the barrelling winds and our freshly shingled roof.

Downstairs, the roar of the winds made the silence of the house almost palpable. Amy and the children were spending the week in Michigan, so I rode out the storm in solitude. When the winds subsided

and the rain changed to a soft pitter-patter, I climbed back up the stairs and into bed, grateful that the house was still standing and that the dead maple was, too.

I awoke late to the sound of chain saws and, looking out into the bright sunlight, realized just how deep my gratitude should have been. Up and down Cumberland Street, in front of our new house, our neighbors wandered through the branches lying across the road. Out back, the dead maple still stood (only one small limb had fallen to the ground), but the top of our neighbors' maple lay in the rear of our yard, the trunk turned 180 degrees and butting up against the side of our garage.

Over here at the old house, we have fared much worse. The entire top of the maple behind the garage snapped off, and the backyard is packed with debris. I can barely squeeze between the treetop and the garage; on the other side, 30 feet away, the wood presses up against the fence. Our 20-foot redbud tree is a mangled mess, crushed by the falling maple. Amazingly, the garage emerged unscathed, even though it stands between the tree and where the top fell.

As I continue to slice away at the branches, I realize that the trunk has landed right where I planted the English oak that Mark Dahlgren gave me three years ago. I had promised to let him dig it up if we ever sold our house, but when we told his wife back in early May that we were moving, he was afraid it would not transplant well that late in the spring. Now, sadly, it appears to be too late.

I'm not the only one still at work; the cleanup will continue for another few weeks. Most Rockfordians spent the first few days after the storm coping with the loss of power; over 80,000 homes were left without electricity. (Aaron Wolf and his family, living close to Rockford Memorial Hospital, got their power back rather quickly, but they spent the day chopping up walnut branches and an elm tree that had barely missed their van.) My wife and children had returned that Saturday afternoon, and we spent the night on the front porch, with a citronella candle and a battery-powered radio, listening to the Grand Ole Opry. Sunday night on the



porch, we jumped up at every sound of traffic, until finally, around 10:00 P.M., two ComEd cherry-pickers rolled down the street, to a hearty round of cheers. It would be another 18 hours before power was restored to our neighborhood and another three days before the entire city came back online, courtesy of electrical workers from as far away as Kansas City and Houston. At one point, a day and a half after the storm, a convoy of ComEd trucks over a mile long was sighted on the tollway from Chicago to Rockford.

There's still no reliable estimate of how many trees were lost and how much property was damaged (though, considering the scope of the former, the latter seems mercifully small), but we now know what caused the destruction: in-line winds of 80 miles per hour, gusting up to 100. It wasn't until Sunday afternoon, listening to WNTA's heroic round-the-clock coverage (it was the only radio or TV station to devote its airwaves solely to helping folks weather the storm's fallout), that I realized that, despite the constant (and very close) lightning, I had heard no thunder. The winds had drowned it out—or perhaps blown it away. Only then did I understand how so many could claim to have slept through the entire storm.

After five hours in the 90-degree heat, the end is in sight. The chain has been dulled, and the wood bears burn marks where the saw has passed through. I make the final cut, shut off the chain saw, and stand for a moment in the Sunday-afternoon silence. Wiping my brow, I lean over and pick up the last two logs. As I toss the second one onto the woodpile, the leaves carpeting the ground at my feet come alive, and the English oak rises slowly from the grave. After two weeks flattened to the ground, it is bent, bowed, scarred, but not broken. Mother Nature is tenacious, even more so than man. c