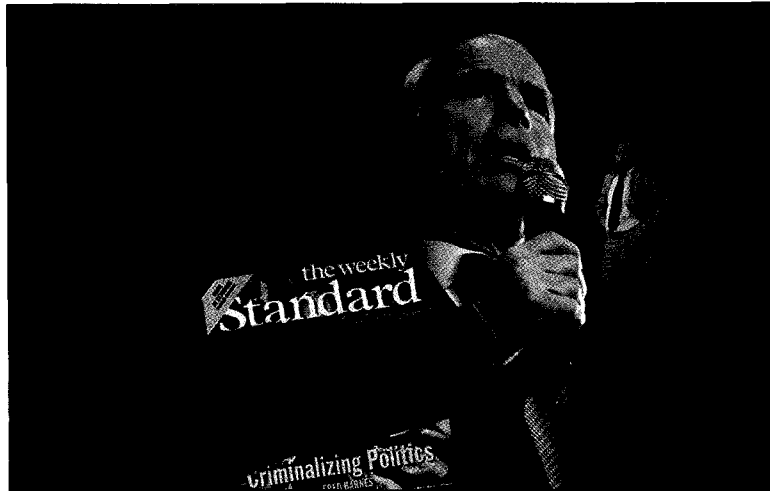


Neo-McCainism

The Highest Stage of Neoconservatism?

by Leon Hadar



It is difficult to imagine, but there was a time when pundits in Washington were tagging John McCain as the ultimate *un*neoconservative Republican figure whose nationalist yet pragmatic approach to foreign policy was being viewed with suspicion by your average global democratic crusader—not to mention the members of what Pat Buchanan described as Israel’s Amen Corner.

When, as a freshman Arizona Republican representative, McCain warned that, by virtue of our involvement in Lebanon, the U.S. military could be drawn into a Middle Eastern quagmire, he was attacked by the hawks in his party. But his position was eventually embraced by the Reagan administration and Congress after suicide bombers blew up the Marine barracks in Beirut.

McCain’s contrarian views on America’s post-Vietnam global strategy became even more evident after he replaced Barry Goldwater in the Senate, when he expressed concerns about President George H.W. Bush’s plan to send ground troops to the Persian Gulf to force Iraq’s Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait in August 1990. “If you get involved in a major ground war in the Saudi desert, I think support will erode significantly,” McCain told the *Los Angeles Times*. “Nor should it be supported.” And he made a point that sounds familiar to antiwar critics today: “We cannot even contemplate, in my view, trading American blood for Iraqi blood.”

The Arizona senator continued to exhibit his *Realpolitik*

instincts during the early years of the Clinton administration when he urged pulling U.S. forces out of Somalia and expressed skepticism about the idea promoted by Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan to use U.S. military force as part of an effort to end the civil war in the former Yugoslavia.

McCain’s conversion from what could be described as a “Powell Doctrine Republican”—subscribing to the notion that Americans should deploy U.S. troops only when core American interests are at stake and an exit strategy is in place—into a flaming neoconservative interventionist took place sometime in the late 1990’s and somewhere on the road to Pristina just when he started planning his first run for the presidency. McCain called upon the Clinton administration to take military action to end the war in Kosovo in 1998, blaming the Serbs for the bloodshed there and citing familiar neoconservative concerns about the need to bring an end to an humanitarian catastrophe.

“Seeking to differentiate his views from those of other Republican presidential aspirants and from the growing isolationism of House Republicans, [McCain] would place his new interventionist instincts within a larger ideological framework,” writes historian John Judis in the *New Republic*. “That ideological framework was neoconservatism,” he explains, adding that “McCain began reading *The Weekly Standard* and conferring with its editors, particularly Bill Kristol,” while selecting leading neoconservative figures as his advisors. It was around that time that McCain also started to promote the U.S.-led effort to oust Saddam Hussein from power, cosponsoring the Iraq Liberation Act, which called for regime change in Baghdad.

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What Judis and other observers fail to mention is that McCain's metamorphosis into a neocon was also an indication that he was planning to play the Israel Card during his race against George W. Bush by marketing himself to supporters of the Jewish state, including the large contingency of Christian Zionists, as the pro-Israel candidate. It was part of a strategy of contrasting McCain's views with those of Bush the Elder, whose criticism of Israel's settlement policies during his last year in office had marked him as an "anti-Israeli," if not an antisemite, in the eyes of members of the Israel lobby in Washington.

From that perspective, the neoconservative agenda of establishing American hegemony in the Middle East, starting with regime change and nation building in Iraq and followed by the spread of democracy in the entire Middle East and from the Balkans to the borders of China, seemed to be the centerpiece of McCain's new foreign policy. The irony is that it was not McCain but George W. Bush (who had sounded quite skeptical about nation building and lacked any strong pro-Israeli "credentials" during his first race for the White House) who ended up implementing the entire neoconservative program after September 11.

Like the rest of the neocon crowd, McCain became a cheerleader for the invasion of Iraq—echoing the Bush administration's talking points by warning about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and painting rosy scenarios about postwar Iraq and the Middle East. "Our technology, particularly air-to-ground technology, is vastly improved," McCain told CNN's Larry King on December 9, 2002. "I don't think you're going to have to see the scale of numbers of troops that we saw, nor the length of the buildup, obviously, that we had back in 1991." And during an interview with Chris Matthews on *Hardball* (March 24, 2003), he said that "there's no doubts [*sic*] in my mind, once these people are gone, that we will be welcomed as liberators." His views contrasted with those of Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-NE) and Secretary of State Colin Powell and other foreign-policy realists, such as former national-security advisor Brent Scowcroft and retired Gen. Anthony Zinni, who warned of the devastating costs of ousting Saddam Hussein and invading Iraq.

Against the backdrop of the growing mess in Iraq at the end of 2003, McCain, again reflecting the view of Kristol, started calling for an increase in the number of U.S. troops in Iraq, urging a tougher stance against Iran and her allies in the Middle East while hailing the U.S. alliance with Israel. McCain's early backing for the "Surge," his suggestion that we might have to use military force to prevent Iran from going nuclear, and his staunch support for Israel have become central to his current presidential campaign. In fact, he admitted that he could only win the election if he would be able to convince the majority of the American voters of the need to "stay the course" in Iraq and by extension to win wide public support for the U.S. hegemonic agenda in the Middle East.

Achieving that goal seems like Mission Impossible to

anyone who studies the results of recent public-opinion polls, which indicate that a clear majority of Americans believe the war in Iraq was a mistake and that Washington should start a gradual withdrawal of American troops. Nor is the American public showing any enthusiasm for McCain's (and Bush's) Freedom Agenda in the Middle East, including the need to effect a regime change in Iran. If anything, the continuing bloodshed in Mesopotamia coupled with rising energy prices and the housing and financial crises explain why the American people are in an isolationist mood these days.

Taking on a Churchillian persona, McCain has vowed to face up to the "defeatists" and the "appeasers" who are supposedly unwilling to fight the forces of "Islamofascism." "There's [*sic*] going to be other wars," McCain told a television interviewer. "I'm sorry to tell you, there's [*sic*] going to be other wars. We will never surrender but there will be other wars." He has recruited all the top neoconservative thinkers, including Robert Kagan, Max Boot, and John R. Bolton, and has appointed Randy Scheunemann, a well-connected lobbyist and political insider with strong ties to the neoconservatives, as his leading political advisor. And as he campaigns, his foreign-policy addresses tend to recycle the latest editorial in the *Weekly Standard* or echo the latest ideas raised by Kagan, Boot, and Bolton in their recent op-ed pieces.

In March, during a major foreign-policy address in Los Angeles, McCain stressed that the "War on Terror" would continue to be the focus of his administration's global strategy; the "transcendent challenge" of "radical jihadism" would be the lens through which President McCain would view U.S. foreign policy. At the same time, he promised to replace the United Nations with a League of Democracies that will include Israel—but none of the nondemocratic Arab governments. In short, McCain is committed to an interventionist Wilsonian and Israel-centric foreign policy, under which his administration will complete the neoconservative grand strategic project in the Middle East that George W. Bush launched after September 11.

McCain and his advisors have insisted that he would adopt a more "pragmatic" and "multilateral" foreign-policy approach than that of the current administration. In some ways, however, when it comes to U.S. policy toward the Middle East, McCain sounds more bellicose than Bush. At a stop at Murrells Inlet VFW Hall in South Carolina during his "Straight Talk" tour, McCain was asked when he thought the U.S. military might "send an air mail message to Tehran." After infamously humming a few bars of "Bomb Iran," he explained that Tehran is "dedicated to the destruction of Israel" and that he, like President Bush, "will not allow Iran to destroy Israel."

"That is straight talk," explained conservative columnist Pat Buchanan. "You get John McCain in the White House, and I do believe we will be at war with Iran," he told MSNBC's Joe Scarborough. "That's one of the things that makes me very nervous about him." Buchanan added that

there is no doubt that “John McCain is going to be a war president. His whole career is wrapped up in the military, national security. He’s in Putin’s face, he’s threatening the Iranians, [and] we’re going to be in Iraq a hundred years.” Indeed, McCain’s confrontational posture *vis-à-vis* Russia and China would make it almost impossible to continue pursuing current diplomatic efforts to engage Tehran and resolve the numerous problems—its nuclear program, its involvement in Iraq, its support for Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Palestine’s Hamas—through peaceful means.

Moreover, McCain has vowed to continue pursuing Bush’s policies toward Israel-Palestine, which have helped to secure Israel’s interests while leading to a diplomatic dead end for the peace process. When he was awarded the Henry “Scoop” Jackson Distinguished Service Award by JINSA (the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs) in fall 2006, McCain described himself as “pro-American and pro-Israeli,” two terms he does not believe to be contradictory.

Fresh from sealing the Republican presidential nomination in March, McCain made an effort to burnish his credentials with a two-day trip to Israel, where he was joined by his Democratic neoconservative pal, Sen. Joe Lieberman (and Republican Lindsey Graham). Pledging “never again,” McCain received a hero’s welcome in Jerusalem during a visit to the Holocaust Museum (Yad Vashem) where supporters chanted “Mac is back” as he shook their hands and posed for photographs. During his meeting with Israeli officials and journalists, McCain emphasized the common strategic threats facing the United States and Israel, suggesting that Iran’s alleged support for insurgents fighting U.S. troops in Iraq was linked to Tehran’s aid for Hamas and Hezbollah. “In the difficult situations that lie ahead for Israel, it would be to its advantage for the White House to be occupied by a man like John McCain,” wrote Amir Oren, the military analyst for *Ha’aretz*.

Historians caution us that, while it may be tempting to try to predict U.S. foreign policy under this or that president by deconstructing his statements and campaign speeches, in many cases the actual policy pursued by the candidate once he wins the White House is quite different.

For example, in their reelection campaigns, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt said they wanted to keep the United States out of World War I and World War II, respectively. However, both Democrats later led the country into direct military conflict. Richard Nixon opened relations with China and had a policy of *détente* toward the Soviet Union, and Ronald Reagan brokered an historic nuclear-arms-control agreement with Moscow—even though both men ran on staunch anticommunist platforms.

More recently, presidential candidate Bill Clinton bashed then-President George H.W. Bush for “coddling” the “tyrants” in Beijing and then, after he won office, pro-

noted a normalized trade relationship with China and her accession to the World Trade Organization. Nor should one overlook the fact that, during a televised debate with Al Gore, presidential candidate George W. Bush scoffed at the notion that nation building should play an integral part in U.S. foreign policy.

Some of McCain’s liberal fans in the media, including Judis, recall that once upon a time, before he joined the ranks of the neocons, McCain had been a cautious realist. Is it conceivable that President McCain, responding to the pressures of his office and the strategic realities of the Middle East—particularly the erosion of U.S. diplomatic and military power there—will have no choice but to take steps to begin a gradual withdrawal from Iraq, engage Iran and Syria, and reach an Israel-Palestine agreement? In fact, these views are shared by the *Realpolitik* wing of the Republican Party, which includes Colin Powell, Richard Armitage, Brent Scowcroft, and Henry Kissinger, all of whom have been opposed to or skeptical of the decision to invade Iraq, and all of whom, according to press reports, are now members of McCain’s foreign-policy team.

Those who speculate that McCain will withdraw from Iraq, negotiate with Iran, and press Israel to withdraw from the occupied Arab territories tend to apply the “only Nixon could go to China” analogy—in other words, only a Republican with impressive national-security credentials could mobilize public and congressional support for making painful foreign-policy decisions. That is certainly a provocative suggestion. But testing it could prove to be very costly. After all, the guy who entertained his audience with “Bomb Iran” is probably not going to sing “Give Peace a Chance” any time soon. ◊

Line to Circle

by Jennifer Reeser

Willing to be disfavored on the theme
Of well-maintained restraint as it applies
To those I venerate, the things I prize,
And all priorities I most esteem,
Like a straight stroke within an artist’s scheme
Of ovals—apt to few, unfit in size
Or scale, a fork where generally lies
A French curve—I will form the stern extreme.
Too much extended clarity of arc
Exists as yet in you, my friend, to end
A lenient, rolling vagrancy and talk,
And toward your widespread, catenary mark
From birth my temperament was meant to bend—
A charcoal shaft against a shield of chalk.