

On Neoconservatism

P A U L G O T T F R I E D

THE FOLLOWING ESSAY contains observations on what has been called at different times both "neoconservatism" and "neoliberalism." These terms have been used to designate a movement that is neither liberal in the sense in which the A.D.A. might now employ that term, nor conservative in a sense that would be fully acceptable to a William F. Buckley, let alone a Joseph de Maistre. This problem of definition, however, has not served to check the growing political and intellectual influence of this group. By now many of their leading personalities have achieved high place in government and universities. Through prestigious journals like *Commentary* and *Public Interest* and through their penetration of conservative think tanks like the Hoover Institution and A.E.I., neoconservatives shape the thinking of our national leaders from the President on down.

About three years ago a Chicago professor of decidedly leftist orientation, Peter Steinfels, published a book that attacked the neo-conservatives for their putative shortcomings. Criticizing them for being inimical to Third World socialist regimes and redistributionist policies, Steinfels depicted Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Moynihan, Samuel Huntington, Norman Podhoretz, and Daniel

Bell as figures who had turned their backs on the oppressed. These men had allegedly abandoned the quest for greater social equality at home and abroad for a number of reasons, including both their exaggerated fear of leftist anti-Semitism and the lack of statistical proof that past welfare programs had achieved their announced goal. The neo-conservatives contended that Great Society programs, because of inherent structural flaws, had, in some cases, benefited bureaucrats far more than the poor. Steinfels, however, cites callousness and other character flaws to explain his subjects' attitudes. For example, he associates Moynihan's supposed turn toward the right with his desire to win further favor as the house-liberal of the Nixon administration. Moynihan is likewise seen as a vain U.N. ambassador, who heaped eloquent scorn upon the developing nations because he revelled in domestic applause.

Steinfels writes for the converted: that is, for those who, unlike myself, have never seriously questioned the left's purity-of-heart and factual accuracy. Thus he never bothers to refute (why should he?) the Communist and Third World left appeal to anti-Jewish prejudice, that affirmative action programs explicitly discriminate against households whose primary wage-earners are

white and male, or that most Third World regimes are in fact brutal tyrannies. But one should not expect Professor Steinfels to protect his right flank: such a practice may be useful at Bob Jones University but not in the charmed circles in which he and his book move. Despite these basic points of disagreement, there are questions about neoconservation which merit further investigation.

A source of frustration for modern traditionalists is that both the political spectrum and the thrust of topical issues are always moving away from them. The left sets the agenda not only for its own discussion, but, even more significantly, for that of its opponents. Thus American conservatives, by and large, avoid any argument against government-enforced job quotas for women that would focus on traditional feminine roles in the family. The characteristic conservative response to affirmative action has been to appeal to individual rights and the principle of equal opportunity. Although neither stand should be considered exclusively leftist, conservative politicians and publicists, in this instance as in others, have shied away from debating social policy from a firmly defined traditionalist standpoint.

On affirmative action they have predictably repaired to slogans that liberal democrats used to defend the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a law intended—if one recalls—to provide all Americans with freedom from economic discrimination. Nor was it simply “bad public relations” that made Goldwater sound extreme in 1964 for his stated commitment to freedom and anti-communism, a commitment that Kennedy had proclaimed to ecstatic journalists in his inaugural address only four years earlier. In the early sixties America, under the impact of a radicalized intelligentsia and growing welfare bureaucracy, veered sharply to the left and, in the process, forced the right to “adjust.”

As an historian I have sometimes wondered why conservatives raise their banners on abandoned leftist positions. If the European left cannot resist the “totalitarian temptation” to flirt with the communists, then the right has an equally obstinate *idée fixe*: pouncing upon discarded leftist slogans and proclaiming them as its own. I believe *The*

Neoconservatives will aid in this process by giving rightist accreditation to a set of stimulating social democrats whom many conservatives properly admire. Who, after all, would deny that the American intellectual right has in recent years drawn polemical ammunition from the neoconservative publications, *Public Interest* and *Commentary*? Indeed the editors and contributors to these journals have been lionized at numerous conservative gatherings. Steinfels, who treats about a half dozen neoconservatives, devotes the greatest attention to Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, and D. P. Moynihan, but his list can be greatly expanded to include kindred personalities only marginally mentioned in the text, such as Walter Berns and Michael Novak.

Such a list would encompass moderate leftists who might until recently have been called social democrats in Europe. These neoconservatives support the welfare state and more than a few, such as Bell and Novak, still consider themselves either socialists or social democrats. Steinfels admits that the neoconservative position emerged “as an antibody on the left” and was intended as a counterweight “to the excesses of the new left and counterculture.” Nonetheless, although acknowledging the leftist origin of the neoconservative challenge to trendy liberalism, Steinfels also presents neoconservatism as the “legitimizing and lubricating ideology of an oligarchic America.”

What he means by this is that some alleged neoconservatives, most notably Irving Kristol, have defended “democratic capitalism” against new left redistributionist schemes. And yet, Kristol’s supposed ally on the right, Daniel Bell, persistently calls himself a socialist. Bell and Nathan Glazer, another neoconservative, both actively campaigned for George McGovern in 1972. D. P. Moynihan and Seymour Lipset, two more of Steinfels’ neoconservatives, remain strongly committed to a mixed economy. Lipset has, in fact, lectured to conservative audiences on the virtues of organized labor and against the Republican Party’s supposed pandering to greedy businessmen.

Conservatives may be heartened by Moynihan’s attacks on communist tyrannies and

by Bell's critical remarks on the adversary culture, and they may consult *Commentary* for arguments against SALT II and study *Public Interest* for the gloomy effects of minority quotas; nonetheless, an obvious political demarcation exists between the two camps. For conservatives, especially traditionalists, the new left and its liberal imitators represent more than a slight disfigurement of the American democratic left. Cultural nihilism, levelling egalitarianism, and self-mortifying attachment to the cult of the downtrodden have all fueled past leftist struggles against privilege and traditional social values. While admittedly the modern American left has sometimes attached itself to good causes—e.g., intermittently to anti-fascism and to the social improvement of American Negroes—neither the levelling impulse nor revulsion for the dominant culture has ever been missing from its numbers. The condemnation of white America as racist was a characteristic liberal attitude of my youth. Moreover, social, artistic, and sexual experimenters have all gravitated in modern Europe to the communist and socialist parties. The left by its nature is the despiser of all tradition and cultural permanence. Obviously some neoconservatives would like to have their ideological cake and eat it at the same time. Bell, for example, insists on making distinctions among the polity, the economy, and culture. Thus while he advocates economic socialism and civil liberties, he also defends moral order and artistic restraint as a cultural critic. Yet, as Steinfels properly points out, the disjunction Bell makes is ultimately indefensible. The support Bell gave to Senator McGovern entailed not only an economic choice in favor of material redistribution. His decision carried cultural, or countercultural, implications, much as the dedication to political libertarianism signifies a choice of cultural values. Those three spheres that Bell wishes to keep separate are indissolubly related, but to accept this relatedness might spell the end of neoconservatism by causing its submergence into the more traditional right.

Steinfels repeatedly notes a certain "toughmindedness" on the part of neoconservative critics. They delight in exposing the

sentimentality of the radical left and pile up statistical research to expose the inadequacies of liberal social programs. Yet, what he ignores is the continuing relationship of many neoconservatives to the very left they attack. Nathan Glazer, for example, actively supported the McGovern campaign after having published blistering attacks on minority quotas and busing to achieve racial integration. Although his candidate in the presidential race took far more distasteful stands on both these issues than the Nixon administration, Glazer put aside his scruples to campaign for McGovern. According to his later comments, McGovern would have ended the war quickly without being able to implement any radical redistributionist ideas. In an essay published during the same year, however, Glazer furnished what seems a far more plausible explanation for his political position. As the descendant of Jewish immigrants, he still supported the Democrats as a party opposed to prejudice and in favor of social justice. Never mind that Glazer's own research gave the lie to both these contentions, that the Democrats were becoming by his own admission a party of fat-cat bureaucrats and their hangers-on, or that the left and the Democratic Party were demanding what for Glazer were hateful quotas for academic and commercial posts. Evidently, what Jean-François Revel calls a "Myth of the left" still thrives among some neoconservatives.

Steinfels understandably does not quote that extensive literature that Lipset, Bell, and Glazer have produced about the right-wing dangers they perceive to American democracy. All three figures, especially Lipset, have devoted more energy to exposing nativist and fundamentalist threats to American social progress than to defending oligarchies or denouncing hippies. Steinfels' flaming anticommunist, Senator Moynihan, has habitually voted as a liberal on defense issues and economic policies. At least one-half of the editorial staff of Steinfels' journalistic *bête noire*, *Commentary*, rejected Gerald Ford as excessively conservative and supported his more liberal opponent in the 1976 presidential race. Finally, that supposed monster of reaction, Irving Kristol, editorial-

ized in the *Wall Street Journal* in favor of that "prudent conservative" Gerald Ford and against the supposedly impetuous and regressive Ronald Reagan.

Steinfels, by calling his subjects reactionary, not only engages in rhetorical overkill but oversimplifies their problematic connection to both the left and the right. Most neoconservatives can be described as thinkers in transition. Sentimentally and operationally they prefer to be allied to the American moderate left; and though that position has been increasingly shaped by the more radical left in recent years (note that political difference between J.F.K. and his ne'er-do-well brother), most neoconservatives have stayed democrats or even socialists. As Steinfels himself remarks, their polemical activities grew out of their relationship with others on the intellectual left. As the price of maintaining that tie, the same group continues to perform the rituals of decrying enemies on the right while rallying to the candidates of their leftward drifting national party.

Nonetheless, the neoconservatives take cultural stands and raise political issues to which only the right will currently listen. Perhaps Steinfels correctly identifies them with the propagation of a "serious conservatism," without acknowledging, however, the sometimes accidental nature of this achievement. Some neoconservatives, by clinging to unrealistic political alliances, have come to resemble wayward missionaries who swill with those drunkards they seek to reform. Some neoconservatives assert that corporate capitalism is utterly incompatible with traditional moral and social values. Whatever the obvious merits of this analysis, it seems unlikely that the McGovern-Kennedy coalition of feminists, abortion advocates, and counterculture intellectuals can currently outbid the right in accommodating traditionalists. As Irving Kristol and Michael Novak have realized, the capitalist right is the only place where traditional morality and religion are taken at all seriously in contemporary American politics.

The most thoughtful of Steinfels' neoconservatives, Irving Kristol, has properly grasped the historical options by declaring himself *tout simplement* a conservative. Kris-

tol now advocates a "conservative welfare state" that combines capitalist productivity with republican virtues. Some of his critics have properly noted the utopian aspect of this project. M. Stanton Evans has called attention to Kristol's unproved premise that the welfare state can be made to reverse its previous record of impeding efficiency while expressing anti-traditional impulses. This critical observation may be correct, but should not cause us to lose sight of that profound cultural concern informing Kristol's proposal. In an age of convenient politics and blurred distinctions—when traditionalists and libertarians try to bury their differences on the right, and when some neoconservatives still doggedly pursue Democratic bandwagons on the left—Kristol has pointed to what may be an historically necessary synthesis of ideas.

A reconsideration of these conclusions of almost three years ago would necessitate a revision of two points. One correction would concern the prediction that most neoconservatives would continue to declare for the left even while denouncing its policies. The last presidential race served to discredit that prophecy. Glazer overcame his inner contradiction by vocally supporting a candidate who took his positions on social issues. The same was true for Podhoretz and Kristol, who both conspicuously campaigned for Reagan. Such a realignment should have been no surprise when at last it emerged. Reagan and his aides had long been courting neoconservative support: dropping hints about cabinet posts in the appropriate ears and organizing advisory committees during the presidential race containing *Commentary* contributors. By the same token, the maiden wooed had nowhere to go but to her one persistent suitor. The Democratic Party in 1980 made no effort to hold on to its right wing. Its positions on social issues and President Carter's record and statements on foreign policy were clearly offensive to the *Commentary* circle. The Party and its leaders may have taken a calculated gamble that a majority of American voters stand closer to the New Left than the Moral Majority. But once having acted on that assumption, Democratic leaders had to accept the fact of a

weakened hold on culturally conservative social democrats of the neoconservative kind.

The second amendment concerns my sometime perception that neoconservatives are sentimentally drawn to the left despite their conservative positions on many policy issues. Part of this ambivalence, insofar as it exists, may be attributed to the cultural differences between the neoconservatives and the old right. Both groups come largely from self-contained cultures that once confronted each other across an abyss of mutual suspicion: the one, Eastern urban-Jewish and the other, American heartland-Protestant. Despite their previous political differences, the two groups each felt threatened by the direction of liberal policies in the sixties and seventies. Spokesmen on both sides articulated common concerns and gradually did so together as old conservative think tanks and organizations, in quest of new allies and new policy formulations, threw open their doors to former adversaries. It was undoubtedly the old conservatives of the Philadelphia Society, Hoover Institution and Intercollegiate Studies Institute who set the example of hospitality, but their overtures paid off in dividends. By 1980 the neoconservatives had abandoned their xenophobia and were no longer referring to their conservative hosts and sponsors as "rightwing extremists."

On the ideological as well as social level, a new spirit of unity between the two camps developed. With the continued exception of some libertarians, conservative journalists and intellectuals have apparently come to accept the establishment of an American "welfare state." Not only Irving Kristol but a more mainline conservative, George Will, now praises the economic legislation of the New Deal. He has warned his readers about the political and moral irresponsibility of having government cut back too far on our public welfare commitments. In foreign policy discussions in conservative journals, it is often Acheson and Truman, both neoconservative heroes, not their conservative opponents, who today receive the highest praise. Conservative historians look back nostalgically at the containment policy of the postwar Democratic administration, which may be described as the neoconservative *belle époque*

of the Truman era. These scholars no longer consider Truman, as did an older generation of conservatives, ineffective in foreign affairs.

On the other hand, some of the most thoughtful attacks on secularist education, gay lib and the feminist movement are currently coming from neoconservatives. From a liberal perspective, these attacks may be infinitely more insidious than the preachments of Moral Majoritarians. The writers for *Commentary*, after all, are reaching a largely liberal reading public, with whom they often share a common ethnic and educational background. They can thus partly disarm the initial hostility that their ideas, if encountered in other contexts, would arouse in many *Commentary* readers. Moreover, neoconservatives often accept enough liberal premises to avoid offending those they are trying to reach. They argue against busing while professing their lifelong dedication to civil rights and integration. They point to the unhistorical character of an absolute divorce of religion from American public education, while expressing opposition to prayers in public school. (Glazer has taken the first two stands and Terry Eastland has espoused the last two, both in *Commentary*.) In any case, the neoconservatives can be seen helping the older American right and, perhaps more importantly, the New Right through their measured assault on liberal dogmas.

Will this growing alliance hold up? Without indulging in prophecy again, I shall take the right to express some slight skepticism. The emergence of neoconservatism was very much tied to a particular phase of American political and cultural history. It developed as the anti-war, feminist, and ecology movements swept over American society and came to influence our political life. It gained strength while the American right was desperately looking for new ideas and for those who could explain changes that both mystified and disgusted it. On the right, neoconservatives came to be seen as what Karl Löwith once called Martin Heidegger, "*Denker in dürftiger Zeit*," thinkers living in a gloomy time who until recently were associated with those evils they are now called upon to examine. I suspect that neoconserva-

tives are aware of their provisional status within the conservative establishment. In all probability, they already know that Ronald Reagan is not simply an older version of J.F.K., however much their fiscal and foreign policies may sometimes resemble each other. Nor can one merely assume that conservative journalists and historians will continue to exalt a neoconservative past or to advocate a neoconservative present. A very conservative intellectual was elected senator from North Carolina in 1980, and an even more conservative professor might have obtained the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities. A traditional intellectual right, without any predilection for the New Deal or for postwar liberalism, may soon come back into prominence. In addition, the New Right may continue to find intellectual supporters who will not automatically defer to neoconservative opinions. In all likelihood, they will sound more like John East and George Carrey, who often agree with the Moral Majority, than like editorialists for the *Wall Street*

Journal. A hotly contested battle for control of the N.E.H. has already spoiled the era of good feeling between the traditionalists and New Right on the one side and neoconservatives on the other. What the repercussions of this falling out will ultimately be can only be guessed, yet one may assume that the two camps are now farther apart at the end of this struggle than before it began. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party may escape the embrace of its leftwing and try to reconstitute the once durable New Deal coalition. I mention these possibilities not as mere conceits, but as contingencies that may bear on the future fate of neoconservatism. The neoconservatives are political commentators, not the authors of timeless truths. As politicized men of letters, they address themselves to shifting situations and circumstances. Their fortunes turn on whether they remain useful to those in or near power. There are no grounds, however, to assume that those conditions that have favored their present ascendancy will continue to prevail even one year hence.

James Madison: Philosophical Pluralist

DANTE GERMINO

I SHALL ARGUE that there are two senses in which the term pluralism may be understood—the pragmatic and the philosophical—and that Madison was *not* a pluralist in the first sense, but that he was one in the second. Furthermore, I shall contend that, far from being a mere quibble about terms, the resolution of the question of what kind of pluralist James Madison was has enormous relevance for the kind of country we want to be today.

In his great book, *The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics*, William Yandell Elliott traced the origins of what he called “anti-intellectualistic pluralism” in a variety of irrationalist currents in twentieth century political thought.¹ While I should not wish to endorse every aspect of his interpretation, I hold Elliott’s book to be indispensable reading for everyone who wants to understand the “pluralism” of recent and contemporary political science. Following Elliott’s lead, I shall call this pluralism “pragmatic.”

Pragmatic pluralism must be credited with having widened the sphere of politics to include what Hegel had called “civil society.” The aridity of much of earlier American political science which had concentrated on “the state” and its formal legal enactments was exposed for all to see by the pragmatic pluralists. However, the weaknesses of the pragmatic approach have become increasingly evident. I do not propose here to dwell on all of those weaknesses—for my paper is more about Madison than about contemporary political science—but I do wish to underscore what, with Elliott, I consider to be the *hamartia*, or tragic flaw, of pragmatic pluralist political science: *viz.*, its irrationalism about ends.

According to pragmatic pluralism—or to what some would call interest-group liberalism—the problems of politics may be reduced to the competition of organized groups representing the various “legitimate”

interests in a modern, developed society for influence on public policy. There is high contempt for philosophy expressed in such an approach: the success of the system is allegedly proved by the fact that it “works.” Out of the free play of interests, a certain equilibrium is said to be established for a time. One need not bother one’s head about such “abstractions” as justice or the common good, because these terms have meaning only in relation to the groups interpreting them. There is no intersubjective basis for the good; terms of moral discourse are relative to those using them. Good, the pragmatic pluralists would say ironically with Hobbes, is what men call good. Pragmatic pluralism, then, attempts to sweep substantive problems about the ends and priorities of government under the rug. The “just” and the “right” are matters to be settled procedurally, they claim.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated conclusively that the Madison whom contemporary interest group theorists hail as their progenitor is no older than H. Allen Smith and Charles Beard. In an article remarkable for its succinctness, the historian Paul Bourke has pursued the fortunes of the Tenth *Federalist* in twentieth century social science. He concludes that contrary to what the pragmatic pluralists have thought, it was actually “a *retreat* from the intellectual world of Madison’s Tenth *Federalist* which characterized the development of modern pluralism.”²

The concluding, acid-tongued paragraph from Bourke’s article, “The Pluralist Reading of James Madison’s Tenth *Federalist*” is worthy of quotation in its entirety.

For men whose political sensibility was shaped initially by the process of revolution, tempered by the sense of governmental failure in the 1780s, and revived in the act of constitution-making, a central goal