



An Honest Assessment of Neoconservatism

Given that Republicans will select their presidential nominee before we know it, and given that three of the four candidates in the GOP field are neoconservatives, it would behoove us to revisit neoconservatism.



By looking at specific thinkers widely recognized as representatives of neoconservatism, we will soon see that far from being “anti-Semitic” or any other kind of pejorative, and far from being but the latest version of conservatism, neoconservatism is a distinct intellectual tradition. Moreover, it is an intellectual tradition that embodies theories of knowledge, morality, and political philosophy that are not only [different from](#) but incompatible with those constituting [conservative](#) thought.

Neoconservatism

Leo Strauss

It seems that no conversation of the theoretical trappings of neoconservatism is devoid of reference to Leo Strauss. Unfortunately, rare are those analyses of the relationship between Strauss’s thought and the neoconservative vision that accurately encapsulate just how the former supplied philosophical inspiration for the latter. More importantly, while Strauss has exerted a formative influence over neoconservative thought, he is hardly the sole or primary influence that he is typically made out to be. In fact, he himself gave expression to a much older tradition.

This tradition is what we may refer to, for lack of a better term, as “rationalism.”

Like any other philosophical vantage point, there is no exhaustive set of terms in which to define rationalism. It admits of multiple variations. However, in all its versions, rationalism affirms a robust conception of human reason. At the very least, reason, from this perspective, is trans-historical: ultimately, it transcends the contingencies of place and time. Reason has access to “principles” — moral principles — that are just as universal and timeless as reason itself. And in accordance with these principles, reason is capable of organizing whole societies.

Although Strauss styled himself an opponent of modern or Enlightenment rationalism, that he was a rationalist, albeit of pre-modern sort, is something that he expressly admits. In fact, it was precisely in his critique of conservatives such as Edmund Burke that his affinity for rationalism becomes unmistakable.

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss remarks that Burke — widely recognized as “the patron saint of modern conservatism” — may have been correct in opposing “modern ‘rationalism.’ ” But insofar as his opposition “shifts almost insensibly into an opposition to ‘rationalism’ as such,” Burke goes awry [313].

Burke is among the most eminent champions of what Strauss refers to as “the historical school.” Classical or traditional conservatives such as Burke resolutely eschew rationalistic theories according to which reason and morality are dislodged from the flow of history. Rather, they tend to prefer more historically and culturally-sensitive approaches. Put more simply, conservative theorists have been partial to tradition-centered treatments of reason and ethics. For this, Strauss refers to them as members of “the historical school.”

To his credit, though, Strauss recognizes the legitimacy of their aversion to rationalism:



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Yet the founders of the historical school seemed to have realized somehow that *the acceptance of any universal or abstract principles has necessarily a revolutionary, disturbing, unsettling effect as far as thought is concerned* [.] [Emphasis added.]

The problem with recognizing “universal” and “abstract” principles is that such recognition “forces man to judge the established order, or what is actual here and now, in the light of the natural or rational order; and what is actual here and now is more likely than not to fall short of the universal and unchangeable norm” [13]. [Emphasis added.]

In summary:

The recognition of universal principles thus tends to prevent men from wholeheartedly identifying themselves with, or accepting, the social order that fate has allotted them. It tends to alienate them from their place on the earth. *It tends to make them strangers, and even strangers on the earth* [12-13]. [Emphasis added.]

In rejecting rationalistic conceptions of reason and morality, Burke and the conservative theorists whom he inspired are guilty of ushering in “a certain depreciation of reason.” Their skepticism concerning reason’s pretensions is most readily revealed in Burke’s view of a constitution. Burke — incorrectly, according to Strauss — “rejects the view that constitutions can be ‘made’ in favor of the view that they must ‘grow,’” and he rejects “in particular the view that the best social order can be or ought to be the work of an individual, of a wise ‘legislator’ or founder” [313].

So, for Strauss, reason is trans-cultural or trans-historical, and it consists of moral principles that are just as universal and independent of the contingencies of place and time. In accordance with these principles, human reason is capable of “making” whole societies. Burke and the conservatives who followed him unequivocally reject these notions.

Neoconservatives, we will now see, clearly back Strauss over Burke.

Allan Bloom

Allan Bloom was a student of Strauss’s. Bloom is also associated with neoconservatism. Like Strauss, Bloom has a penchant for the abstract and universal over the concrete and particular.

In his [The Closing of the American Mind](#), Bloom describes the United States as a country rooted in “the use of the *rational principles of natural right*,” for America promises “untrammelled freedom to reason” [39]. The Declaration of Independence embodies “principles” that demand liberation from “the kinds of attachments” characteristic of “traditional communities[.]” American patriotism, in contrast, consists in a “reflected, rational, calm, even self-interested loyalty,” not to America as such, but to its “form of government and *its rational principles* [.]” Considered in the light of “natural rights,” “class, race, religion, national origin or culture all disappear or become dim” [27]. [Emphasis added.]

Bloom’s rationalistic perspective on reason and morality led him to precisely that view that distinguishes neoconservatism as the particular species of Enlightenment rationalism that it is. There will not be peace in the world, Bloom insists, until every country has embraced “the best of modern regimes — *liberal democracy* [.]” What Bloom calls “liberal democracy” is “*the regime of equality and liberty, of the rights of man*,” and “*the regime of reason*” [259]. Liberal democracies are populated by men of “*rational principles*” [53]. The inhabitants of liberal democracies would never think to go to war with one another “because they see the same human nature and *the same rights applicable everywhere and to everyone*” [202]. [Emphasis added.]



Other Neoconservatives

Douglas Murray's book [Neoconservatism: Why We Need It](#) is as clear and comprehensive an apology for neoconservatism as any of which I am aware. Murray acknowledges the debt that neoconservatism owes to men such as Strauss and Bloom, and he elaborates upon the cardinal tenets of the neoconservative persuasion.

Neoconservatives, he explains, not only hold "liberal democracy" to be the best form of government, but they are convinced that world peace promises to be forever elusive until every country becomes a liberal democracy. Murray writes that "democracy is the desirable endpoint of all human societies[.]" Although it cannot alone "make people good, it is the surest means of preventing nation-states [from] waging war on one another." This position, he declares, has "become part of the neoconservative DNA" [68] [.]

[Neoconservatism and classical conservatism](#) are worlds apart. On this, Murray couldn't be more decisive. In fact, he tells us that "socially, economically, and philosophically," neoconservatism offers "something very different from conservatism[.]" Neoconservatism offers "*revolutionary conservatism.*" [38] [Emphasis added.]

It is "revolutionary" primarily because of its recognition that the U.S. government cannot rest until the planet becomes an oasis of "liberal democracy." Murray approvingly summarizes the founding Statement of Principles of The Project for the New American Century. The "signatories," he writes, "declared that the use of American power had been repeatedly shown over the previous century to be a force for good." Thus, it must remain such throughout the next century. By executing its "global responsibilities" via increases in "defense spending"; strengthening its "ties with its democratic allies"; challenging "regimes hostile to American interests and *values*;" and promoting "the cause of 'political and economic freedom abroad,'" [82-83] America will spend the 21st century "erasing tyrannies and spreading democracy" through "interventionism, nation-building, and many of the other difficulties that had long concerned traditional conservatives." [73] [Emphasis added.]

That neoconservative foreign policy is inextricably linked to its rationalistic notions of reason and morality should by now be clear. But in case it isn't, there are other neoconservatives to whom we can turn who dispel all doubts.

Bill Bennett is one such figure. In [Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism](#), Bennett expresses his belief that America must be a force for good in the world. More specifically, he refers to "the War on Terror" as a "war over ultimate and uncompromisable purposes, a war to the finish." This is "a war about good and evil." [45]

More people would be capable of recognizing this if more people today had been educated to grasp "the superior goodness of the American way of life," [46] a goodness that consists in a "steadfast devotion to *the ideals* of freedom and equality." [Emphasis added.] These ideals in turn are inseparable from "the self-evident truth that all men are created equal," Bennett continues, a basic principle to which America is the first country in all of history to be "dedicated[.]" America is "a country tied together in loyalty to a principle" whose "universality ... caught fire." [26]

Neoconservative Walter Berns seconds this view. In *Making Patriots*, he says that Americans derive their identity not "from where we were born but, rather," from "our attachment to those principles of government, namely, that all men are created equal insofar as they are equally endowed by nature's God with the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." [50]



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Berns asserts that American patriotism “is not a parochial patriotism,” for it “comprises an attachment to principles that are universal,” [8] principles to which “any people might subscribe.” [5] For this reason, “to be indifferent, especially *to the rights of others*, would be un-American.” [8] [Emphasis added.]

The logic of this reasoning is inescapable: If it is “un-American” for Americans to be “indifferent” to “the rights of others,” then insofar as much of the world still lives under undemocratic governments, “the rights” of most of the world’s people are constantly under assault. Hence, American “patriotism” requires that we incessantly intervene in the affairs of other countries until we remake them into “liberal democracies.”

Conclusion

Neoconservatism is fundamentally different from conservatism proper. The former affirms rationalistic conceptions of reason, morality, and political philosophy that the latter rejects. For neoconservatives, reason consists of universal, abstract moral principles in accordance with which societies everywhere must be organized. For conservatives, in glaring contrast, reason and morality are embodied in culturally and historically-specific traditions.



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