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Neoconservatism Unmasked

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Defining neoconservatism is no small task, given that its exponents deny it's a systematic philosophy. Neocons such as Irving Kristol prefer to characterize it as a "persuasion," a "mode of thinking," or a "mood." How exactly does one define a mood? At best, they say, it's an intellectual movement influenced by thinkers as diverse as Plato, Trotsky, and Hayek. Daniel Bell captured the syncretic nature of neoconservatism when he described himself as a "socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture." On one level, neoconservatism certainly is a mode of thinking, but it's also a comprehensive political philosophy shaped most fundamentally by the ideas of Leo Strauss via Irving Kristol.



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Let me begin with how the neocons present themselves. Kristol once boasted that neoconservatism is the first variant of 20th-century conservatism that is “in the ‘American grain.’” The implication of this extraordinary claim is that Goldwater conservatism is somehow outside the American grain. The neoconservatives always have been, by contrast, defenders of the post-New Deal welfare state. Not surprisingly, they support, in the words of Ben Wattenberg, a “muscular role for the state”—one that taxes, regulates, redistributes, and fights. This, apparently, is what it means to be in the American grain.

What really bothers the neocons about small-government Republicans is that they lack a “governing philosophy.” The neocons have long urged Republicans to reinvent themselves by giving up their Jeffersonian principles and developing a

ing strategies for getting, using, and keeping power. The neocons therefore urge the GOP to become chameleon-like by adapting to changing circumstances.

The neocons’ statesmanship is grounded in two assumptions: the identification of the public interest with some kind of golden mean and the conceit that only they have the wisdom by which to know that mean. The neocons believe it is both necessary and possible for wise statesmen to find the golden mean between altruism and self-interest, religion and science, socialism and capitalism. Norman Podhoretz, for instance, has argued that neoconservative statesmen should be able to figure out the “precise point at which the incentive to work” would be “undermined by the availability of welfare benefits, or the point at which the redistribution of income” would begin “to erode economic growth.” Ultimately, the neocons accept the moral ends of liberal socialism, with the caveat that they can do a better job of delivering the services.

At the core of my book is the claim that the political philosopher Leo Strauss was the most important influence on Irving Kristol’s intellectual development. It reveals, for the first time, the importance of Kristol’s 1952 review of Strauss’s *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. In a sense, this is the Rosetta Stone for understanding the deepest layer of neoconservatism. Strauss, says Kristol, had “accomplished nothing less than a revolution in intellectual history.” This is

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new philosophy of governance. Ironically, the neocons’ governing philosophy is not defined by fixed moral principles. Instead, it’s an intellectual technique defined by pragmatism. It’s about “thinking politically,” which means develop-

the moment when neoconservatism was born.

What did Kristol learn from Leo Strauss? Straussianized neoconservatism is defined by what Kristol called a “new synthesis” of ideas—one he characterized as “classical-realist.” At the core of neoconservatism is a fundamental dualism. Philosophically, Strauss thought it possible to advocate the “shrewd ‘power politics’” of Machiavelli within a larger Platonic framework that separates theory from practice. Thus, Kristol learned how to reconcile Platonic idealism with Machiavellian prudence to create the neoconservative synthesis.

What, then, are the core principles of neoconservatism? In terms of metaphysics, they take the “political community,” or what Kristol called the “collective self,” as the primary unit of moral and political value. They accept Plato’s premise that the polis is the only community that can fulfill man’s natural end. The actual content of the public interest is whatever wise men say it is, which is precisely why it should never be defined. The highest task of neoconservatism is to superimpose ideological unity on the collective self in the name of an ever-shifting public interest.

With respect to knowledge, they begin with the Platonic assumption that ordinary people are irrational and must be guided by those who are rational. According to Kristol, there are “different kinds of truth for different kinds of people . . . and the notion that there should be one set of

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truths available to everyone is a modern democratic fallacy.” The highest truth is restricted to the philosopher, while the common man is limited to myth, revelation, and custom. Neoconservatives believe the opinions of the nation must therefore be shaped by those who rule. Ultimately, the vulgar must be ruled by faith and by its necessary ally, force.

What about the neoconservative ethics? If you believe that there are “different kinds of truth for different kinds of people,” then you must believe that there are different moral codes as well. The vulgar many need piety and patriotism as the ordering myths by which to live. For the neocons, morality is conventional and pragmatic. Because they regard the nation as the primary unit of political value, they regard virtue to be that which works—not for the individual, but for the nation. Morality is therefore defined as overcoming petty self-interest and sacrificing for the common good.

With regard to politics, the neoconservatives’ philosophy of governance centers around the conceit that it is possible, in the words of Kristol, for a small elite “to have an a priori knowledge of what constitutes

happiness for other people.” The highest purpose of neoconservative statesmanship is therefore to shape preferences, form habits, cultivate virtues, and create the “good” society. The neocons advocate using government force to make “good” decisions for others in order to nudge them toward choosing a life of virtue and duty.

The culmination of the neoconservative philosophy is their call for “national-greatness conservatism.” Following Irving Kristol and Leo Strauss, David Brooks, William Kristol, and a new generation of neocons proclaimed the nation as the fundamental unit of political reality, nationalism as the rallying cry for a new public morality, and the national interest as the moral standard of political decisionmaking. The moral purpose of national-greatness conservatism, according to Brooks, is to energize the American spirit, to advance a “unifying American creed,” and to inspire Americans to look beyond their narrow self-interest to some larger national mission. The neocons’ basic moral-political principle is clear and simple: the subordination and sacrifice of the individual to the nation-state.

Politically, Brooks would use the federal government to pursue great

“nationalistic public projects” in order to unify the nation and prevent its slide into what he calls “nihilistic mediocrity.” It is important that the American people obey some grand central purpose—defined by the government. The ideal American man, he argues,

should forgo his individual values and merge his self with the collective soul. This is precisely why Brooks has praised the virtues of Chinese collectivism over those of American-style individualism.

In the end, the neocons want to “remoralize” America by creating a new patriotic civil religion around the

idea of Americanism—essentially redefining the American grain. The neoconservative vision of a good America is one in which ordinary people work hard, go to church, recite the Pledge of Allegiance, practice homespun virtues, sacrifice themselves to the common good, obey the government, fight wars, and die for the state.

The neocons’ national-greatness philosophy is also the animating force behind their foreign policy—which is indeed a branch of their domestic policy. The grand purpose of their foreign policy is to inspire the American people to transcend their selfish interests and instead support uplifting national projects. The neo-



conservatives' policy of benevolent hegemony will, according to William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "relish the opportunity for national engagement, embrace the possibility of national greatness, and *restore a sense of the heroic*." In other words, America should wage war in order to combat creeping nihilism. Sacrificing both treasure and blood in order to bring democracy to strangers—*this* is a mission worthy of a great nation. By saving the world from tyranny, America will save herself from her own internal corruption.

Neoconservatism is a systematic political philosophy. But a political philosophy that advocates moderation and prudence as its defining principles is either hiding its true principles, or it represents a transition stage on the way to some more authoritarian regime—or both.

My deepest fear is that the neoconservatives are preparing this nation for a soft, American-style fascism—one purged of its ugliest features and gussied up for an American audience. To be clear, neocons are *not* fascists. But they do share some common features. Like the fascists, they reject the values and principles associated with Enlightenment liberalism, and praise the nobility of the "barbarian" virtues such as discipline, courage, and sacrifice. They are metaphysical collectivists, regarding the nation as the primary unit of political value and demanding that individuals serve some fuzzy notion of national greatness. Neocons are statist, ad-

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vocating the use of coercive power to regulate man's economic and spiritual life. They downplay the importance of constitutional boundaries, while glamorizing the virtues of statesmen. Finally, they believe that life should be defined by conflict, whereas ongoing peace is morally degrading. In sum, I worry that the neocons are making us feel comfortable with certain fascist principles by draping them in traditional American manners and mores.

The neoconservatives are the advocates of a new managerial state—one controlled and regulated by a mandarin class of virtuecrats who think the American people are incapable of governing themselves. They are the conservative version of FDR's brain trust: they want to regulate virtually all areas of human thought and action, from the bedroom to the boardroom. They are the false prophets of Americanism. Those who wish to defend our Enlightenment values must therefore recapture the intellectual and moral high ground that once defined the promise of American life. ■



Cato Scholar Profile: **DANIEL J. IKENSON**

DAN IKENSON is associate director of Cato's Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies, where he focuses on WTO disputes, regional trade agreements, U.S.-China trade issues, steel and textile trade policies, and antidumping reform. He is the author of many studies on trade policy and is the coauthor of *Antidumping Exposed: The Devilish Details of Unfair Trade Law*. Before joining Cato in 2000, he was director of international trade planning for an international accounting and business advisory firm. Ikenson holds an MA in economics from George Washington University. He is married with three children.

This spring, General Motors announced first-quarter profits of \$3.2 billion—its best quarter performance in 10 years and its fifth consecutive profitable quarter. Doesn't this validate those who say the auto bailout was a success?

No. GM's recent financial success is testament only to the fact that even the most mismanaged company can experience some short-term success if the resources of the federal government are deployed on its behalf. This is particularly true during a period of rebounding auto demand. The government extinguished GM's debt, infused it with capital, restructured its ownership, underwrote its development and production costs, and offered huge tax credits to subsidize sales of its most anticipated vehicle.

Most opponents of the bailout weren't contending that the government couldn't resuscitate GM. We were worried that it would do just that—and in the process inflict damaging costs, some of which would be hard to observe and quantify. I have described those costs in various articles.

You've said that wooden bedroom furniture from China represents "the poster child for antidumping reform." Why?

The many sordid details of the furniture case explode the myths that are used to justify the antidumping law's existence. The law is hailed by its supporters as a tool to ensure "fair trade," "level the playing field," and protect American firms and workers from predatory foreigners intent on monopolizing the U.S. market. As is typical, the petitioners in the furniture case were a group of U.S. producers. But their target was another group of U.S. producers, who

had invested in furniture production in China. Claiming only to want to restore furniture production and its related jobs in North Carolina, the petitioners were found to have invested heavily in furniture production in Vietnam, Indonesia, and Brazil, and had no intention of bringing production back to the United States. That may have made good business sense to the petitioners—and one can hardly blame them for exploiting a stupid law. But the public is entitled to know the real purposes for which the antidumping law is used.

What would be the most effective policy change Congress could enact to improve U.S. trade conditions?

Congress has constitutional authority to regulate commerce with foreign nations. Deregulating commerce by eliminating all remaining U.S. trade barriers and maintaining reasonable, transparent foreign investment rules would be the most appropriate and effective use of that power. But Congress has, at times, used its power to obstruct trade—foreclosing options on Americans and forcing them to absorb import duties, which are often imposed for the benefit of politically favored interests.

Congress should recognize that we live in a globally interconnected world where it is utterly misguided to characterize economic competition as "our" producers against "their" producers. The proliferation of transnational production and supply chains, as well as other forms of cross-border investment, means that trade barriers at home not only tax U.S. consumers, but also raise production costs and undermine the competitiveness of U.S.-based companies. ■

Charitable Giving from Your IRA Rollover Reinstated



The bundle of tax legislation hustled through Congress in late 2010 included a one-year (2011) extension of the popular “IRA rollover.” Under this rollover provision, individuals who are aged 70½ may make direct charitable contributions up to a total of \$100,000 in calendar year 2011 from their Individual Retirement Accounts (IRA). This distribution will help you satisfy the required minimum distribution (RMD) you must take from your traditional IRAs after age 70½. Plus, the distribution will be excluded from your gross income—but you will not receive a charitable deduction for the amount going to charity. Why? Since the distribution is excluded from your income, the IRS won’t allow a double benefit.

Still, rollovers offer some real tax benefits, because structuring a distribution as a rollover allows you to escape some of the endless complexities of our income-tax system. For example, if you were to take a traditional distribution—that is, distribution directly to you followed by a deductible gift to charity—you might find that your hoped-for deduction is reduced (or deferred) by the “income percentage limitations.” This term of art refers to the fact that you generally can’t take a charitable deduction for an amount in excess of 50 percent of your income. Also, other benefits stem from the fact that rollover distributions are not, as already mentioned, included in your gross income. This is helpful because gross income serves as the calculation base for such things as the various limitations on

itemized deductions and the level of taxation of Social Security payments. The more gross income you have, the more your deductions will be limited, the more your Social Security will be subject to tax, and the more your Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT) exemption will be reduced.

The overarching point of this discussion is that you should check with your tax adviser to see if this provision might be helpful to you in 2011. Perhaps it would facilitate a gift to Cato or another favorite charity. As always with tax benefits, numerous rules and limitations apply. While you can review these in full with your adviser, some of the more generally pertinent limitations are that:

- the owner of the IRA must be at least 70½ when the distribution is made;
- the gift must be from a traditional or Roth IRA;
- distributions must be made by December 31, 2011;
- the donor must direct the IRA manager to transfer funds directly to a public charity; and
- the charity must not provide any goods or services in return for the gift, meaning that the gift may not be used for memberships, friends groups, etc.

For more information about this or other gifting topics, please contact Cato’s director of planned giving, **Gayllis Ward**, at (202)-218-4631 or at gward@cato.org. ■

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