Conservatives and neoconservatives

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Neoconservatism has become the topic of the day. But does neoconservatism really exist, and if so what is it? What exactly is "new" in neoconservatism, and how does it differ from other strands of conservative thought in America? And finally, what kind of political influence does neoconservatism wield today? Of course, it is this last question that is nowadays on everyone's mind. Yet one can hardly begin to weigh the influence of neoconservatism on the Bush White House without first reaching some understanding of what it is, and how it differs from the old conservatism.

Until quite recently, neoconservatism was thought to be a spent force. Few intellectualss anymore identified themselves as "neocons," and the label rarely surfaced in po-

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itical conversation and debate or in the news media. The two leading spokesmen for neoconservatism had themselves concluded that the term had outlived its usefulness. In his 1995 book *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, Irving Kristol asked, “Where stands neoconservatism today?” to which he answered: “It is clear that what can fairly be described as the neoconservative impulse ... was a generational phenomenon, and has now been pretty much absorbed into a larger, more comprehensive conservatism.” A year later, in an address before the American Enterprise Institute, Norman Podhoretz emphatically declared that “neoconservatism is dead.”

Over the last year, however, and especially during the months prior to the war in Iraq, the label of neoconservatism made its way back into our public discussions and political debates. “It is neocons ... who are the brains behind Bush’s push to expel Hussein,” wrote Jacob Heilbrunn in the *Los Angeles Times*. “Without them there would be no war talk.” He was not alone in singling out the neocons. It has become the label of choice for left- and right-wing war critics. Though John Judis and Patrick Buchanan may have little in common, though Christopher Matthews and Paul Craig Roberts may not agree on much else, they all agree that the war in Iraq was somehow an outgrowth of neoconservative ideology. And the fascination with neoconservatism has hardly abated: “Neocons On The Line,” blared a recent headline in *Newsweek*; “The Neocons in Charge” read another in the *New York Review of Books*. Presidential hopeful Howard Dean declared on the campaign stump that President Bush has “been captured by the neoconservatives around him.”

At first I was tempted to dismiss the return of the neocon label as conspiracy mongering by the Left, or as the convenient shorthand of journalists to describe apparent fault lines within the Bush administration. Both explanations have merit, but it is also the case that neoconservatism never quite went away as claimed. Neoconservatism may in fact constitute not a generational phenomenon but one of several fundamental alternatives within conservatism taken as a whole. Generally, the
neoconservative label has been applied to a particular group of intellectuals who moved from what might be called a neo-liberal politics in the 1960s and 1970s to what became known as neoconservatism. It now seems more likely that something like neoconservatism represents a natural conservative response to modernity, at least in America, one with its own distinctive qualities, its own style and substance, its own strengths and weaknesses.

The basic contours of neoconservatism most readily emerge against the backdrop of its two main conservative rivals: libertarianism and traditionalism. (I will have little to say of religious conservatives and Straussians, since they are frequently allied with neocons and have moreover helped shape the neocon impulse.) These three conservative approaches—traditionalism, libertarianism, and neoconservatism—have distinct historical and philosophic roots. Generally speaking, traditionalists look to Edmund Burke, libertarians to Friedrich Hayek, and neocons to Alexis de Tocqueville. However, each finds its origins in something more elemental. Anyone of us can't help but have a gut feeling about modern American life—its possibilities and limits, whether it is humane and decent or alienating and corrupting. Those of us who regret much of modern American life and find solace in old, inherited ways will cling to traditionalism. Others, who celebrate the new freedoms and new technologies, will turn to libertarianism. As for those who see in modernity admirable principles but also worrisome tendencies, their persuasion will be neoconservatism.

The traditionalists

In the post-World War II period, a number of exceptional thinkers sought to adapt a traditionalist, Burkean conservatism to American public life. They became known as the “new conservatives.” The most prominent of them was Russell Kirk, who authored in 1953 the best-seller The Conservative Mind. An overly simple but for our purposes accurate enough way of characterizing Kirk’s achievement would be to say that he initiated a turn among American conservatives away from a bourgeois Lockean
philosophy and toward a mildly aristocratic Burkean one. A typical American "conservative" in the pre-World War II period was in fact a nineteenth-century liberal—a believer in laissez-faire, scientific improvements, and progress more generally. The Burke revival that Kirk helped spark in the 1950s lent to American conservatism a very different voice. No longer would it settle for being the party of "big business" or an apologist for bourgeois society. The traditionalists joined Burke in his lament that "the age of chivalry is gone," and concurred in his denunciations of the "new conquering empire of light and reason."

To the new conservatives, the problem was modern rapaciousness generally, as the following passage from Kirk's classic illustrates:

The modern spectacle of vanished forests and eroded lands, wasted petroleum and ruthless mining, national debts recklessly increased until they are repudiated, and continual revision of positive law, is evidence of what an age without veneration does to itself and its successors.

And in Kirk's romantic description of the town of Beaconsfield where Burke was buried, traditionalism's unease with modern mass society is clearly evident:

Little has changed here: the good old houses of four centuries, the tidy half-timbered inn, the great oaks and the quiet lanes are as they were in Burke's day, though the villadome and new-housing-scheme expanses of London bite deep into Buckinghamshire, and light industry is invading the neighboring towns. At Stoke Poges, only a few miles distant, a tremendous and hideous housing estate of unredeemed monotony has shouldered right against Gray's country churchyard. But Beaconsfield Old Town is an island of ancient England in an industrial and proletarian sea of humanity.

Kirk's project was less about public policy than philosophic definition and cultural recovery. With Burke as his touchstone, Kirk aimed at explaining to an American audience what it meant to be conservative and to think conservatively. In *The Conservative Mind*, he surveyed a kaleidoscope of conservative thinkers, from John Adams to Tocqueville, and from Disraeli to Henry Adams. It had been a long time since Americans had been taught to take
these thinkers seriously, and Kirk’s prolific writings changed the face of American conservatism. In its early years, the *National Review* was heavily influenced by traditionalist modes of thought, and for a while Kirk wrote a column for the magazine. The magazine’s opening statement of purpose, authored by William F. Buckley in 1955, was a neo-Burkean call-to-arms in which it was declared that the *National Review* “stands athwart history, yelling Stop.”

The desire to stop, reflect, reconsider, and perhaps go back remains alive within conservative circles. It can be seen in the conservative defense of the traditional family, and in its cultivation of the older virtues and a religious sensibility. Most practically it is evident in the traditionalist view that the federal government has usurped the prerogatives of localities. Such conservatives look back wistfully to an America of small towns and close-knit communities, and they have become increasingly critical of what they view as President Bush’s “big government conservatism.”

**The paleoconservatives**

This is the place to digress for a moment and say a word about the paleoconservatives, as they have been labeled. Commonly thought to be the heirs of Kirk and the traditionalists, paleoconservatives in fact dissent from what Kirk considered true conservative principles. They are not conservatives so much as reactionaries or pseudo-radicals. The paleos can fairly be said to despise much of contemporary American life and would like somehow to move beyond the modern American political debate.

Paleoconservatives were largely unknown to the general public until the 1990s when Patrick Buchanan championed many of their ideas in his efforts to remake the Republican party. Buchanan’s goal was not to restore an older conservative ideal but to initiate a right-wing reformation instead. In 2000, he made his radical intentions clear by bolting from the Republican party and running as the Reform candidate. “With this campaign,” he declared, “I intend to redefine what it means to be a conservative.”
Buchananism stood for anti-free trade and anti-globalism in economic policy; anti-immigration and pro-life in social policy; and isolationism in foreign policy. Yet despite his strong pro-life position and frequent religious appeals, Buchanan was rejected by rank-and-file religious conservatives and their leadership. He may have declared a "religious war" for the heart and soul of the nation, but religious conservatives did not choose to support him. They sided in the Republican primaries with President Bush in 1992 and Senator Robert Dole in 1996—neither of whom was known to be strongly supportive of the religious right's agenda. The media largely missed the salience of these alliances, which greatly damaged Buchanan's electoral viability. The paleos' agenda, as it turns out, is more quixotic than anyone quite realized, and the religious right more bourgeois than is generally supposed.

The very term paleoconservative is misleading. Unlike the traditionalists, the paleocons contend that we have become irrevocably cut off from a living, sustainable tradition. In their view, the acids of modernity have left us entirely disinherited from old customs and ways, and conservatism's project of conservation is but a glittering illusion. They have thus gone in search of new gods. Thomas Fleming, editor of the paleoconservative journal Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture, has looked to sociobiology, evolutionary theory, and anthropology—hardly traditional conservative guides—for a new beginning. Paul Gottfried, another influential paleo theorician, has sought solutions in the philosophy of Carl Schmitt as well as varieties of historicist ideology. Samuel Francis, political editor for Chronicles, has called for "radical opposition to the regime." Meanwhile, Gottfried, in his book The Search for Historical Meaning, has spoken sympathetically of a return to "spiritual heroes who enhance civilization by further illuminating the ground of being." In another of his books, The Conservative Movement, Gottfried has summed up the paleos as follows:

Above all they raise issues that the neoconservatives and the Left would both seek to keep closed, for instance, questions
about the desirability of political and social equality, the functionality of human rights thinking, and the genetic basis of intelligence. In all these assaults on liberal and neoconservative pieties, paleoconservatives reveal an iconoclastic exuberance rarely found on the postwar intellectual Right. Their spirit is far more Nietzschean than neo-Thomistic, and like Nietzsche they go after democratic idols, driven by disdain for what they believe dehumanizes.

The libertarians

In contrast to the paleoconservative and the traditionalist, the libertarian is entirely at home in today’s world. He takes his bearings from John Locke, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and such twentieth-century social thinkers as Friedrich Hayek. The libertarian spirit is neither backward-looking nor meliorative. It is progressive, and aims at expanding economic freedom and individual choice ever-forward. Libertarians oppose almost all regulation, whether of markets or morals.

It is arguable whether libertarianism is in fact a variety of conservative thought. Hayek once wrote an essay explaining why he was not a conservative, and Milton Friedman has always insisted that he is a nineteenth-century liberal, not a conservative. But there is at this late date no point in playing semantics and quibbling over labels and definitions. From the 1950s to the present, libertarianism has been an important and influential—arguably the most influential—stream of thought on the Right, informing both Republican policy making and conservative ideology more generally.

Nowhere is the libertarian influence more discernable than in the conservative opposition to Big Government. And here the influence of the writings of Hayek, and in particular his 1944 bestseller The Road to Serfdom, looms large. The book was written in response to the rise of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism, but also to the growing popularity of economic planning and socialist thought generally in the West at the time. Hayek warned, “We have progressively abandoned that freedom in economic affairs without which personal and political freedom has never
exist ed in the past.” His main target was socialism, of course, but the breadth of his argument was sweeping. In the book’s 1956 and 1976 prefaces, he argued that the expanding welfare states of the United States and Western Europe would also lead, necessarily, to the eclipse of liberty. Indeed, the very notion of “the general welfare” was suspect to Hayek, and in The Road to Serfdom he denounced it as a smokescreen behind which totalitarianism marches.

Traditionalists also look upon the modern welfare state with great skepticism, but it is the less romantic, more analytical and policy-oriented libertarian critique that holds sway today at such Washington D.C. think tanks as the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation. Their concern for economic efficiency and individual liberty predominates, not the traditionalist’s desire to preserve the moral ethos of small-town life. Newt Gingrich rose to Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1994 largely on his libertarian campaign to rein in government regulation and spending. It was libertarianism’s greatest political triumph. The preamble to the “Contract with America” pledged the Republican party to bring about “the end of government that is too big, too intrusive, and too easy with the public’s money.” In his inaugural speech as Speaker of the House, Gingrich urged his fellow congressmen to “learn from the private sector ... from Ford, IBM, from Microsoft.” In this we catch a glimpse of the libertarian’s love affair with the new technologies: They would like to modernize government by e-technology as well as enhance the human pursuit of happiness by biotechnology.

The neoconservatives

My brief overview of traditionalism and libertarianism hardly does justice to the complexity and richness of each, or to the profound impact they have had on American public life. Yet even so the puzzle of their political alliance over the years should be readily apparent. Of course, they are both opposed to much government regulation and spending, but beyond this they might seem to share little
in common. Their fundamental outlooks are quite at odds, and indeed it was the great project of conservatives in the 1950s and 1960s to find a way of reconciling the two—National Review writer Frank Meyer had called his solution "fusionism." However, at a deeper level traditionalism and libertarianism do find common cause, and it is here where their differences from neoconservatism first emerge. For both the traditionalist and the libertarian, and in contrast to the neoconservative, politics is of secondary significance. The traditionalist believes that culture or history is the primary factor in human affairs; for the libertarian it is economics. And thus not surprisingly, they can oftentimes seem to have little affinity for modern democratic life. It is in neoconservatism's appreciation for politics generally and the politics of democracy in particular that its unique characteristics can be seen.

Nostalgia for a pre-industrial, pre-Enlightenment past, as found in traditionalism, is largely absent from neoconservatism. It is not that neoconservatives are proponents of the unregulated market or are without appreciation for our moral and spiritual inheritance as are libertarians. Instead, the neoconservative faults Kirk's neo-Burkean project for its sheer futility. Appeals to tradition as an authoritative guide in American life or as a brake on change and innovation are more than likely to fall on deaf ears. True enough, we have our traditions in America, but these tend to be liberal-democratic ones, such as our reverence for individual rights or our veneration of health and well-being. One need not have lived through our recent cultural upheavals to glean this truth about American democracy. From his visit to America in the 1830s, Tocqueville observed that Americans "treat tradition as valuable for information only."

Not from such American materials is a Burkean politics made of. Recognizing this fact about American life—that almost everything is up for grabs and in continual flux—neoconservatives believe, to paraphrase Tocqueville, that we should aim at educating and directing democracy, rather than seeking to overcome it, or just as inadvisably, as some more literary conservatives in fact do, scorning it. It was a political axiom of Burke's that "when ancient opinions and rules
of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment we have no compass to govern us.” This goes too far for the neoconservative. Without siding with the Enlightenment’s faith in reason as our only true compass, the neocon recognizes that in democratic times ancient opinions cannot rely on their own authority but must defend themselves in open debate, and that old rules must find some other basis than what is known as prescription if they are to flourish. The loss is, of course, considerable, but rather than retreating in defeat or condemning democracy outright, neoconservatives seek democratic substitutes for these older modes of living. Neoconservatives understand that tradition and custom, in themselves, can have little hold on a democratic people, and thus they look to other means to restrain democracy from its worst instincts.

At least here if nowhere else neocons and paleos are in partial agreement: Both share in opposition to traditionalists a sense that much of the past is irretrievable. The question is, where does one go from here? The lamentation for a lost tradition leads paleoconservatives in search of new gods, new heroes, and new myths. Full of disdain for what they consider the democratic idols of equality and commodious living, they seek not to rescue democracy from itself but to expedite its collapse, to make way for a postmodern, postdemocratic age. In contrast, neocons seek to refurbish America’s founding principles and its democratic way of life. They are aware of democracy’s shortcomings—its frequently low aspirations and dehumanizing tendencies—but they also recognize the fundamental justice of democratic equality. Neoconservatives seek to secure a genuine human freedom and dignity in the age in which we live now, the democratic age, rather than in some futurist utopia.

Liberty and despotism

Neoconservatism’s political realism, its insistence that we begin our reflections with how life is actually lived by democratic peoples, has never meant simple boosterism for democratic capitalism. “Two cheers for capitalism,” Irving Kristol once famously remarked—not three. The fault-line between neoconservatism and
libertarianism is to be found here.
Consider again the question of Big Government. Neoconservatives have also been highly critical of the welfare state, and in particular of the Left’s exaggerated hopes in it, but their arguments have been more limited in scope than the libertarian’s. Neoconservatism’s hostility toward the welfare state has never extended, as it does for libertarianism, to the idea of the public good itself. Where libertarians worry that Big Government is liable to stamp out nearly all personal liberty, neoconservatives see things quite differently. In their view, democracies tend to encourage the pursuit of private interests to the neglect of all else, and thus it is the general welfare that is more likely to wither.

The Hayekian analysis of Big Government has always seemed to the neoconservative overly simplistic as well as somewhat naïve. The dangers of soft (or hard) despotism against which Hayek warned are at once more distant than he realized and more insidious than he imagined. Most modern democracies have lived with more extensive welfare states and highly socialized economies than the United States, without somehow reaching a “tipping point” whereupon they tumble into totalitarianism. There is in fact no road to serfdom through the welfare state.

But this good news is overshadowed by a far deeper problem, one that Hayek and his libertarian followers do not see with sufficient acuity, but was well delineated by Tocqueville. Their oversight is in some ways surprising, since Hayek claimed the French philosopher as the inspiration for *The Road to Serfdom*. But Hayek to some extent misunderstood Tocqueville’s argument about the threats to liberty in a democracy, while he lacked his predecessor’s evident solicitousness for the public realm. As Tocqueville explained, it is democracy itself that fosters the growth of government and threatens liberty. The origins of Big Government are several: Democratic peoples have neither the inclination nor the time to engage in public business (being too preoccupied with their own business)—and so in their apathy they leave matters of governing to the State. Their otherwise admirable pride in their independence also feeds the State’s growth. Unlike the power exercised by a
family patriarch, a local magistrate, or a religious minister, governmental authority, being more anonymous, is less likely to offend, and is thus more easily tolerated in a democracy. Democratic capitalism also plays a role. In times of equality, the middle class increases and eventually predominates. Their aspirations for comfort and ease become society’s, as does their strong aversion to whatever might upset their pursuit of well being, and so increasingly the State is looked to for security and public order. For all of these various reasons, concluded Tocqueville, men in democratic times “naturally love the central power and willingly extend its prerogatives.”

Big Government is, as it were, written into the political DNA of democracy. Recognizing this, neoconservatives view the struggle against it as almost, though certainly not entirely, besides the point. The important task is to distinguish those expansions of government that are degrading from those that are a natural response to the middle class’s feelings of insecurity. The problem of the welfare state has less to do with political liberty than with the specter of moral corruption. Thus neoconservatives tended to oppose Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which was rescinded with the reform of welfare in 1996, but are generally supportive of something like Social Security. It became clear that AFDC discouraged work and inflicted considerable damage on the family and marriage, while despite its larger expense Social Security can hardly be considered detrimental to seniors. Of course, the form such entitlements take is of great importance in terms of national saving and investment and economic efficiency.

Neoconservatives object not only to the libertarian critique of Big Government but also to its cramped understanding of liberty. Libertarians rise to the defense of every conceivable freedom but that of self-government; they typically tend to be pro-abortion, pro-drug legalization, pro-human cloning, and so on. Their goal, also ardently advanced by the postmodern Left, is the expansion of individual choice. But the “right to choose” has generally been secured in contemporary America only by enacting a judicial prohibition, one that forbids individuals from acting together to
determine what laws they shall live under.

Now, neoconservatives are hardly a moralistic lot. On some of these contentious cultural issues, they are as likely to be on the "pro" as on the "anti" side. Moreover, their analysis tends toward the urbane—perhaps too urbane given what is morally at stake. Religious conservatives not infrequently become impatient with what they see as the softness of many neoconservatives on these vital issues. However, dispassion should not be mistaken for approval or naïveté about what is on the line. Neoconservatism, after all, came into its own in reaction against the Left's nihilistic revolt against conventional morality and religion. Moreover, neoconservatives are in agreement in their condemnation of the high-handed manner in which the libertarian agenda is enacted. Democratic discussion is circumvented, and "we the people," as the phrase would have it, are disenfranchised. To the neoconservative, the true road to serfdom lies in the efforts of libertarian and left-wing elites to mandate an anti-democratic social policy all in the name of liberty. But it is a narrow, privatized liberty that is secured. An active and lively interest in public affairs is discouraged as a result. Everything is permitted—except a say in the shaping of the public ethos. Libertarian ideology would turn citizens into foreigners who live happily, if indifferently, in their country.

The neocons in charge?

So wherein lies neoconservatism's political influence, and its impact on U.S. foreign policy? George W. Bush's politics and policies, it must be admitted, have, as did Ronald Reagan's, a certain neoconservative resonance. During the primaries, Bush criticized the libertarian approach, declaring that "economic growth is not the solution to every problem," and he rejected its core belief that "if government would only get out of our way, all our problems would be solved." He also dissented from the traditionalist or paleoconservative view of America: "Too often," said Bush, "my party has painted an image of America slouching toward Gomorrah." Against these opinions, Bush advanced the idea of "compassionate conservatism," which he defined as "the creed of
aggressive, persistent reform. The creed of social progress.”
The compassionate conservative, not unlike the neoconservative, is sobered by the difficult problems and peculiar delusions of the modern age, but cautiously optimistic in the good that can still be achieved. Several of Bush’s domestic policies, from his faith-based initiatives to his establishment of a commission on bioethics, are quite congenial to neoconservatism.

But more than anything else it is the war in Iraq that brought back the neoconservative moniker. Critics say that neocons have seized control of Bush’s foreign policy. At first glance this is a surprising claim. Neoconservatism has generally been associated with domestic policy, and has never produced a single approach to foreign policy (just as there is no distinctively neoconservative method of constitutional interpretation). Many of neoconservatism’s representative thinkers—to name but a few, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Norman Podhoretz, and Jeane Kirkpatrick—had rather different views on the foreign-policy issues of the day. The claim is also surprising for the reason that before the 2000 election support for Bush among many neocons was tepid. The editors of the Weekly Standard, for example, backed Senator John McCain in the primaries, and criticized Bush’s foreign-policy positions for being too narrowly “realist.”

However, much has changed since the election, and there is at least something to the claim that Bush’s foreign policy is informed by neoconservatism; certainly, he gets little support from conservatism’s other factions. Libertarians and paleocons have loudly disavowed the Bush foreign policy, and they have been among the president’s harshest critics. Conservative budget-cutters in Congress have complained bitterly about President Bush’s $20 billion in nation-building aid to Iraq. And the traditional-minded conservative George Will has strongly objected to the emerging Bush Doctrine, which he associates with neoconservatism. Will has criticized neoconservatives for their “crusading zeal” on behalf of democracy, and has chastised them for believing, in his words, “that moral objectives in politics are universally applicable imperatives.” He has also compared the neocons to
the French and Russian revolutionaries for their alleged belief "that things—societies, human nature—are more malleable than they are." Such charges are wide of the mark, though they help us to see with greater clarity what is at stake in this debate.

In their approach to the foreign-policy challenges of the 1990s, neoconservatives essentially split into two camps. Neoconservatives as a whole opposed the neo-isolationism of Buchanan, the amoral realism of James Baker and the first President Bush, as well as the cosmopolitan humanitarianism of the Clinton administration, but they were divided on the alternatives. Some, like William Kristol, Robert Kagan, and Lawrence Kaplan, held that America’s national interests are best served by the spread of democracy throughout the world. They favored a vigorous American response to the crises in Kosovo, Rwanda, and elsewhere, and to some extent one could say they are “democratic-evangelists.” But only up to a point. Unlike liberal Wilsonians, their promotion of democracy is not for the sake of democracy and human rights in and of themselves. Rather, democracy-promotion is meant to bolster America’s security and to further its world preeminence; it is thought to be pragmatically related to the U.S. national interest. The principles of these neocons are universalistic, but not so their policy, which steers clear of international organizations and is nationalist and unilateralist. They also have certain domestic concerns of the Tocquevillian variety, such as the belief that democracies are impatient and fickle in the conduct of foreign affairs. In their view, only a principled foreign policy premised on advancing democracy can sustain the American public’s interest in foreign affairs for the long haul.

Meanwhile, a second, smaller band of neoconservatives, whose most prominent spokesman is Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer, has put forth a slightly different vision. They also favor a principled and proactive foreign policy but are less inclined to see America’s national interests as perfectly coinciding with democracy-promotion abroad. Krauthammer, for instance, opposed American involvement in Kosovo and Liberia because the connection between these conflicts and our national inter-
est, however broadly the latter might be conceived, was in his view tenuous. To these neoconservatives, the ambition to spread democracy world-wide or to make democracy's tastes and predilections those of every other state is unachievable. They also believe, contrary to their neocon allies, that purely humanitarian missions, such as Kosovo, are more likely to turn Americans off from foreign affairs and foster isolationist sentiment at home. At the same time, these neocons agree that America's interests are necessarily those of a great and powerful democracy. Moreover, these interests cannot be defined, in their view, in strictly strategic terms, encompassing instead an affirmation of our core democratic beliefs—and no more so than when these beliefs are under attack. Pride in our democratic way of life requires no less of us.

Now, little of this neocon foreign-policy analysis seemed to have made much of an impression on George W. Bush or his advisors at the time—either during the election or in the early months of his administration. But then September 11 came. It seems clear that the president and his closest advisors by temperament prefer to take the initiative, rather than be reactive. They are also philosophically of the view that the executive branch ought to be energetic, especially in its conduct of foreign affairs. Faced by an unprecedented crisis, they found in neoconservatism a marriage of the minds as well as a strategy. In a 1996 article for *Foreign Affairs*, William Kristol and Robert Kagan had supported "actively pursuing policies—in Iran, Cuba, or China, for instance—ultimately intended to bring about a change of regime." No mention of Iraq here, but Kristol and Kagan's argument for regime-change and democracy-promotion had a new audience in the White House after September 11.

It must be said, however, that the neocon influence on the Bush administration can be easily exaggerated and often is. Preventive action in defense of our rights is deeply etched in America's political culture, and is a prominent feature of a Lockean liberal politics generally. Throughout our history we have sought to build fences around our rights, and have tended to see in a long train of abuses plots of enslavement. Americans prefer to act
before the danger is upon them. One might say, admittedly at the risk of some overgeneralization, that in moving against Iraq, the Bush administration reflected aspects of the political psychology of John Locke’s *Second Treatise*. There it is argued that in their defense people must take action before “it is too late, and the evil is past Cure,” and that to be “secure from Tyranny” people must “have not only a Right to get out of it, but to prevent it.” Preventive action in defense of our fundamental rights is perhaps, like Big Government, written into our political DNA. Certainly, it would seem to be an enduring feature of American politics. In any event, however we describe the sources of the Bush Doctrine, this much is clear: It is a policy still in the making, with many political factions in the administration fighting over its ultimate meaning and scope. The administration is learning as it goes and has been improvising considerably. Where it will end up is hardly clear.

**Political regimes**

More often than not political labels distract us from what is truly important, and in the hands of pundits and politicians, they can become merely a way of scoring points against the opposition. Such labels are useful only if they further our understanding of political reality. The public’s rediscovery of neoconservatism is thus to be welcomed, for it returns us to certain fundamental and unresolved quarrels within conservatism. Contrary to general impression, neoconservatism never was subsumed into a broader conservative intellectual movement. This was in fact unlikely to happen, since neoconservatism represents less a mere reaction against the 1960s counter-culture than a recurrent conservative impulse in our democratic age, perhaps its most vital. Conservatism’s other strands are strangely anti-democratic. Traditionalists pine for aristocracy; libertarians look to limited government by technocracy; while paleoconservatives dream vaguely of postmodern utopias. Only neoconservatism among contemporary conservative modes of thought has made its peace with American democracy, and so long as it flourishes, so will neoconservatism.