

What Is a “Neoconservative”?

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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Nowadays a lot of people are throwing around the word *neocon*. One may frequently hear it used on my radio talk show “Christian Worldview with Dr. John Cobin” (both by me and my callers), and you often read it in conservative and libertarian columns. But just what is a neocon anyway?

In 2003, Irving Kristol—the “godfather” of the neoconservatives (or neocons)—argued that neoconservatism is a *persuasion* or an intellectual undercurrent that only intermittently or erratically manifests itself over time. It is therefore not a *movement*. According to Kristol, the historical task and political purpose of neoconservatism is to convert the Republican Party (and American conservatism in general) into a new kind of conservative politics “suitable to governing a modern democracy”. He continues: neoconservatism “is hopeful, not lugubrious; forward-looking, not nostalgic; and its general tone is cheerful, not grim or dyspeptic.” Their heroes tend to be the improbable trinity of Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan, while worthies as Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, and Barry Goldwater are “politely overlooked”. Kristol believes that “neoconservative policies, reaching out beyond the traditional political and financial base, have helped make the very idea of political conservatism more acceptable to a majority of American voters.”¹

One may find many helpful definitions or descriptions of neoconservatism on the internet. For instance, www.wikipedia.org has a rather extensive encyclopedic entry: neocon refers to the political goals and ideology of the new American conservatives—who often come from liberal or socialist backgrounds. They are “characterized by an aggressive stance on foreign policy, a lesser social conservatism, and weaker dedication to a policy of minimal government.” The term “neocon” is sometimes used pejoratively, especially by the self-described paleoconservatives (i.e., true conservatives or “paleocons” and constitutionalists) and many libertarians, who oppose neoconservatism from the political Right. Neocon is a label often applied to journalists, pundits, policy analysts, and institutions affiliated with the Project for the New American Century, as well as to publications such as *Commentary* and *The Weekly Standard*. Neocons are often the focus of criticism for their support of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The *Christian Science Monitor* even has a “Neocon Quiz” online to help people find out whether or not they are a neocon (<http://www.csmonitor.com/specials/neocon/quiz/neoconQuiz.html>). It is a helpful exercise to take the ten-question quiz, and I would encourage you to do so. Not surprisingly, the quiz pegged me as being an “isolationist”, allied with libertarians and anti-globalists. Calvin Coolidge and Pat Buchanan are supposed to be my heroes, but Thomas Jefferson (or any anti-federalist) and Stonewall Jackson would be better choices. Conversely, the results interpretation section says that neocons “want the US to be the world’s unchallenged superpower, share unwavering support for Israel, support American unilateral action, support preemptive strikes to remove perceived threats to US security, promote the development of an American empire, equate American power with the potential for world peace, seek to democratize the Arab world, and push regime change in states deemed threats to the US or its allies.”

So then, a neoconservative is basically a liberal who wears conservative clothing. He represents a move towards expansionist foreign policy and gun control. He supports moderate Republican presidents like George W. Bush who—in line with the political philosophy of Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay, Abraham Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt—strive to “help business” and to expand scientific endeavors with government aid. A neocon may be soft on abortion and accepting of alternative lifestyles. Just note the difference between neocon Dick Cheney’s broadmindedness toward his lesbian daughter’s lifestyle versus the unflinching response that paleocon Alan Keyes has made toward his 19 year old lesbian daughter. Neocons are clearly softer on social issues than true conservatives. However, neocons are careful to give adequate lip service to traditional family values in order to appease the feisty Christian right.

¹ See Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion”, *What it was, and what it is* (August 25, 2003), volume 8, issue 47.

The perniciousness of neoconservatism should be obvious to anyone on the Right. Its subtlety makes its influence more dangerous than the Left's. Regrettably, many well-meaning Christians hold to some or many neocon views without realizing it. Even a couple of my fellow *Times Examiner* columnists embrace neocon ideals. Christian neocons end up working against the cause of truth and liberty while thinking that they are supporting right things. Examples of neocon policies coddled by many Christians include support for "public" schools, Social Security, Homeland Security, and George W. Bush's foreign policies. But are most Christian Republicans neocons? Well, like any other social group, most Christians are simply ignorant and would not be able to tell you what they are. They simply follow the lead of the Piper. And they often feel "forced" into pragmatism: "better to have a neocon Bush than a liberal Kerry", without realizing that both candidates are liberal under the skin.

Neocons have had the unexpected consequence of (1) driving true conservatives out of the Republican Party and into third parties and (2) increasing the possibilities for forging a stronger alliance between the Constitution Party and the right-wing of the Libertarian Party (pro-life libertarians in particular). Neocons will likely cause either a split in the Republican party or a migration from it to genuinely right-wing third parties. And either of those events could prove to be the best thing to happen in American politics in a long time.