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Neoconservatism as Discourse: Virtue, Power and US Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Neoconservatism in US foreign policy is a hotly contested subject, yet most scholars broadly agree on what it is and where it comes from. From a consensus that it first emerged around the 1960s, these scholars view neoconservatism through what we call the ‘3Ps’ approach, defining it as a particular group of *people* (‘neocons’), an array of foreign *policy* preferences, and/or an ideological commitment to a set of *principles*. While descriptively intuitive, this approach reifies neoconservatism in terms of its specific and often static ‘symptoms’ rather than its dynamic constitutions. These reifications may reveal what is emblematic of neoconservatism in its particular historical and political context, but fail to offer deeper insights into what is constitutive of neoconservatism. Addressing this

neglected question, this article dislodges neoconservatism from its perceived home in the '3Ps' and ontologically redefines it as a discourse. Adopting a Foucauldian approach of archaeological and genealogical discourse analysis, we trace its discursive formations primarily to two powerful and historically enduring discourses of the American self: *virtue* and *power*, and illustrate how these discourses produce a particular type of discursive fusion that is 'neoconservatism'. We argue that to better appreciate its continued effect on contemporary and future US foreign policy, we need to pay close attention to those seemingly innocuous yet deeply embedded discourses about the United States and its place in the world, as well as to the people, policies, and principles conventionally associated with neoconservatism.

Key Words

Neoconservatism; discourse analysis; Foucault; discursive formation; genealogy; American foreign policy

Introduction: Redefining Neoconservatism

Now seemingly indelibly tarred with the so-called Bush Doctrine and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, neoconservatism has generated heated debate within the United States and elsewhere. Much of the relevant literature has centred on its advocates—commonly known as

neoconservatives or ‘neocons’—and their historical and intellectual backgrounds, social influences, political fortunes, and foreign policy legacies. With the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the end of the administration of George W. Bush, opinion has been particularly divided over whether neoconservatism represents a fleeting phenomenon in US foreign policy or something more resilient with deeper roots and a longer lifespan. Viewing it as an aberration, Thompson and Brook (2010) penned an obituary for neoconservatism. As early as 2004 G. John Ikenberry (2004: 8) asserted that the strategic vision of neoconservatism was ‘intellectually and politically untenable’. Others are less convinced however, arguing that neoconservatives still influence policy in the Obama administration today (Parmar, 2009; Vaisse, 2010b; Singh, 2014). After all, neoconservatism had been declared dead before (Podhoretz, 1996), only to return to the forefront of American foreign policy.

Certainly, these neoconservatism debates are important. With the 2016 US presidential election campaign underway it is also timely to analyse how neoconservatism will impact on American politics and foreign policy after Obama. However, still missing from these debates is the question of where neoconservatism comes from, or how it is formed. For many, that is because the issue is essentially settled; throughout the literature there is a strong consensus that the origins of neoconservatism lie in the ‘first generation neocons’ of the 1960s who opposed the radical liberalism and utopianism of the New Left movement and promoted a more aggressive approach towards America’s enemies, principally communism. While this understanding may be historically accurate, its validity hinges on some hitherto unchallenged ontological assumptions about what neoconservatism is.

According to these assumptions, neoconservatism represents the political beliefs or worldviews of a particular group of people ('neocons'), an array of foreign policy preferences, and/or a philosophical/ideological commitment to a set of core principles. This we call the '3Ps' approach to neoconservatism: *people*, *policies*, and *principles*.

The '3Ps' approach offers an intuitive understanding of neoconservatism as the ideational and policy preferences of its human agency. Certainly, 'neocons' and their setups (such as the Project for the New American Century, and the *Commentary* and *The Weekly Standard* magazines) do play an important role in defining and shaping what is known as neoconservatism today. In this sense, studies of neoconservatism should take its agency and institutional resources seriously (Dorrien, 1993: 9-10). However, the '3Ps' approach is ultimately unsatisfactory as it reifies neoconservatism in terms of specifically identifiable personnel and relatively static policies and principles. As such, it over-relies on what we might call the 'external logic' of neoconservatism, wherein its existence (and continuity) is tied to these more or less empirically observable manifestations or 'symptoms'. We contend that neoconservatism is manifested in, but ultimately *more* than, these reifications, and that equating it with the '3Ps' may limit our understanding of its dynamic constitutions, as well as its future place in US politics and foreign policy.

Given these key conceptual shortcomings of the dominant '3Ps' approach, this article proposes an alternative analytical framework to reconceptualise neoconservatism as a discourse. Specifically, we employ Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse, discursive formation, and statement as well as his methods of archaeology and genealogy to trace the

discursive formations of neoconservatism to two powerful discourses or statements of the American self: those of virtue and power. Our main focus is on exploring neoconservatism's 'internal logic', or the rules of its construction in the interplay and mutual attraction between these two discourses.

This particular case study of how discourse is constituted also adds to a broader literature of discourse studies in International Relations (IR). Much of this literature rightly problematises the neutrality of discourse (George, 1994), and explores its connection to identity, power, policy and practice in terms of what discourse does, produces, or constructs (Hensen, 2006; Epstein, 2008; Pan, 2012). Valuable as it is, the existing literature is not primarily concerned with how discourse itself is constructed or formed. Yet this question is central to better understanding how discourse is constitutive of political practice. Thus, our analysis has important implications for understanding the role of neoconservatism in shaping US foreign policy. Due to its conceptual focus as well as space constraints, this article will not extend the Foucauldian approach to analyse how neoconservatism constitutes particular US foreign policy, nor does it seek to empirically determine whether or to what extent neoconservatism continues to dominate in the post-Bush period. Rather, its reference to contemporary US foreign policy serves as a brief illustration of how understanding such important empirical questions could be better informed by an ontological reconceptualisation of neoconservatism as discursive formations related to American virtue and power.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it provides a brief critique of the existing literature on neoconservatism and its reliance upon the '3Ps' approach. Second, it outlines a Foucauldian approach of archaeological and genealogical discourse analysis and discusses its relevance to the study of neoconservatism as discursive formations. Next, it examines how these discursive formations have taken place by tracing the intertextual linkages between the discourses of virtue and power in American history. In the penultimate section we briefly illustrate how the debate on the strength of neoconservatism in the Obama era can be better served by a redefinition of neoconservatism along the lines proposed here. The article concludes by arguing that recasting neoconservatism as a discourse offers an improved, more dynamic conception of what it is and how it is constituted, thus pointing to a new way of analysing the presence and influence of neoconservatism in US foreign policy.

A Critique of the '3Ps' Approach

The '3Ps' approach in the existing literature conceives of neoconservatism as the worldview of a particular group of *people*, a suite of foreign *policy* preferences, and/or an ideological commitment to a set of *principles*. Our '3Ps' characterisation does not pretend to capture all the nuances of the existing literature on neoconservatism, nor intend to confine the scholars cited below to these pigeonholes. It is designed to describe some common trends in the study of neoconservatism. With this caveat in mind, we now offer a brief critical survey of the literature. First, the 'people' perspective regards neoconservatism primarily as the ideas of

neoconservatives who are almost uniformly considered to have first emerged in the 1960s. Appearing to be mainly Jewish (Vaisse, 2010a; Ehrman, 1995), these ‘original neocons’ include the journalist and author (the so-called ‘godfather of neoconservatism’) Irving Kristol, and the founders of the most influential ‘mouthpieces’ of neoconservatism: Daniel Bell and Daniel Patrick Moynihan of *The Public Interest* and Norman Podhoretz of *Commentary*. The perception that neoconservatism remains a ‘Jewish cabal’ still circulates today (Sniegoski, 2008), but is also vehemently disputed (Boot, 2004). Prominent individuals from American history including Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, as well as more contemporary figures, notably from the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, are also considered personifications of neoconservatism (see Vaisse, 2010a; Buchanan, 2004).

By putting faces to an otherwise abstract phenomenon, this ‘people’ approach is appealing and even necessary, particularly at moments when high-profile and seemingly prototypical ‘neocons’ occupy high offices in Washington. Even so, well-recognised ‘neoconservatives’ such as William Kristol, Robert Kagan (Vaisse, 2009) and Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 2007: 10) are reluctant to accept the ‘neocon’ label. Further, beyond being commonly labelled as such, it is unclear exactly how one ‘qualifies’ as a neoconservative, especially in more ambiguous cases. For example, some describe Bush as ‘very sympathetic’ (Ryan, 2010: 170) or even ‘instinctively disposed’ (Record, 2010: 30) to neoconservatism. The famous ‘doctrine’ to which he put his name has been labelled ‘a quintessentially neoconservative document’ (Boot, 2004: 21). Others, however, insist that Bush is not a neoconservative (Buchanan, 2004; Halper and Clarke, 2004). This specific case aside, the

larger question is whether it is appropriate to reduce neoconservatism to the thoughts and articulations of certain individuals, for doing so may risk mistaking the fortunes of such individuals and their ideas for signs of neoconservatism's vicissitude. For example, William Kristol and Robert Kagan's assertion that '[t]he road that leads to real security and peace [was] the road that runs through Baghdad' (quoted in Bacevich, 2005: 92) has clearly been discredited. Yet this does not mean that neoconservatism per se has lost its credibility as a result.

Second, given its apparent influence on US foreign policy, neoconservatism has been widely defined as a set of foreign policies or courses of action, such as 'aggressive and unilateral' democracy and free market promotion, or regime change (Boot, 2004). Yet however counterintuitive it may seem, neoconservatism has no fixed foreign policy handbook, 'only a set of attitudes derived from historical experience' (Kristol, 2003: 24). As Fukuyama (2007: 40) observes, 'neoconservatives' have debated 'most of the major foreign policy issues', typically without consensus. Another inside observer notes that 'there are non-trivial differences among [neoconservatives] on important points of policy' (Stelzer, 2004: 4). Thus defining neoconservatism around contested and constantly shifting policy preferences is inevitably deficient. While a certain combination of policies may be strongly linked to neoconservatism at given points in time, defining the latter in terms of the former—akin to naming diseases according to their specific symptoms—ultimately obscures more than it enlightens.

Finally, the ‘principle’ angle arguably offers a better way of conceptualising neoconservatism. For instance, the value of moralism/idealism as drivers of US foreign policy; a belief in American exceptionalism; the requirement of American primacy; and a preference for unilateralism, are often considered trademarks of neoconservatism (Kagan, 2008a: 14-15). Ikenberry (2004: 8-10) identifies four comparable principles of neoconservatism: a belief in the US as the moral arbiter of right and wrong; the requirement of superior American power; unilateralism over multilateralism; and the promotion of democracy abroad as sound security policy. Vaisse (2010b) offers five ‘pillars’ of neoconservative foreign policy: internationalism; primacy; unilateralism; militarism; and democracy (for slightly different takes on neoconservative principles, see Kristol, 2003; Bacevich, 2005).

This perspective is strong on providing a static laundry list (indeed several lists) of ideals but weak on articulating coherent *connections among* those ideals as neoconservative principles. Seen in themselves, none of those principles seem particularly ‘neoconservative’ in nature. This begs the questions of why together they take on a neoconservative quality and why it entails the combination of some principles and not others. If that is because they are commonly espoused by ‘neocons’, then the explanation simply comes full circle to the ‘people’ approach. Moreover, not all ‘neocons’ subscribe to the same principles (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 48), and yet most American presidents have endorsed ideas of American exceptionalism and demonstrated scepticism of multilateral organisations (Lynch, 2010: 125). Designating a particular set of principles as neoconservatism may exclude certain ‘neocons’,

whereas adopting a broader spectrum of principles may cast too wide a net that neoconservatism could well be emptied of its usually intended meaning.

The point here is not that neoconservatism has nothing to do with key people, policies, or principles; it clearly does. The problem, however, is in the unduly specific or static terms in which neoconservatism is ontologically conceived via the '3Ps' approach. This unsatisfactory picture has not been helped by a proliferation of loose definitional terms. For instance, Irving Kristol once labelled neoconservatism a 'persuasion' (Kristol, 1958: 76) after previously designating it an 'idea' (see Kristol, 1995), a 'spirit' and a 'disposition', among other things (Kristol, 2010: 172, 177, 181). Norman Podhoretz (1996: 20) prefers 'tendency', 'since [neoconservatism] never had or aspired to the kind of central organization characteristic of a movement'. Justin Vaïsse (2010: 4) opts for 'movement', but agrees with Podhoretz and Kristol that it represents 'a school of thought, an intellectual outlook or perhaps a "tendency" or "persuasion"'. For Douglas Murray (2006: ix), '[n]eoconservatism is...a way of looking at the world. It is a deeply rooted and relevant philosophy'. Ultimately, it seems '[n]o-one...has ever really succeeded in precisely defining neoconservatism' (Heilbrunn, 2009: 6).

Again there is nothing inherently wrong with understanding neoconservatism in these terms, some of which help us look beyond 'neocons' and 'Bushite' foreign policy to appreciate the deeper roots of neoconservatism in American history. Nevertheless, those terms offer little methodological value to the systematic study of what neoconservatism is and how it is constituted. Against this background, we consider it necessary to engage with

these more ontologically oriented questions by redefining neoconservatism as an intertextually constituted discourse about the American self, one which is open to a Foucauldian approach of discourse analysis.

Towards a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Neoconservatism

Characterising neoconservatism as a discourse is not entirely new (e.g. Ayyash, 2007; Solomon, 2013; Dryzek, 2006). Yet, thus far this characterisation has been made mostly in passing, and discourse has yet to be purposefully applied to neoconservatism as an alternative conceptual framework, which is what this article seeks to do. By discourse we do not mean its more common-sense, empiricist usages as linguistic utterance or a certain practical domain of codified language such as legal discourse. From a scientific or empiricist perspective, discourse reflects, and can be verified by, the objective referent it describes. Yet in the case of neoconservatism we argue that it does not exist prior to or outside of discourse, but is constituted by it. For this reason, we adopt a more Foucauldian concept.

The Foucauldian notion of discourse, referring to systems of thoughts, ideas and practices that ‘systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972: 49), can enrich our analysis of neoconservatism in several ways. First, as just mentioned, it is better able to elucidate the discursively constituted nature of neoconservatism. Second, it helps us go beyond the ‘3Ps’ fixation on ‘people’ and their ‘policies’ and ‘principles’. According to Foucault, subjects (in this case, ‘neocons’), rather than using discourse to express themselves, are themselves constructed through discourse. Third, in constructing its object as real,

discourse has the tendency of directing people's attention to that putatively 'real' thing, rather than to itself. Consequently, a powerful discourse is often deemed common sense (Fairclough, 1992a; Milliken, 1999: 237-240), 'beyond question' or simply 'goes without saying' (Bourdieu, 1977: 169-70). There is no paradox, then, that it at once commands immanent presence in plain sight and escapes critical attention to its existence *as* discourse.

In light of this peculiar characteristic of discourse, the traditionally elusive nature of neoconservatism and conflicting views of what it represents may be better understood and reconciled. For example, sceptical of matter-of-fact statements about neoconservatives and neoconservatism, Irving Kristol enquired '[i]s there any "there" there?' (Kristol, 2003). Without denying their influence, Kristol doubted the existence of neoconservatism as a coherent movement, considering it altogether less tangible. In comparison, Robert Kagan suggests that 'there is something in the American character which leads it in [the neoconservative] direction', and that this 'something' runs through 'the entire sweep of American history' (Kagan, 2008a). When neoconservatism is understood as a discourse, these otherwise contrasting assessments are less disparate than they appear.

What Kristol emphasised is the common sense nature of the neoconservative discourse, so much so that its existence seems unremarkable. Meanwhile, what Kagan refers to as 'something in the American character' illustrates the power of such a discourse in its historical construction of a particular American subject (even though he may not agree that the so-called 'American character' is historically and discursively constructed). While neither Kristol nor Kagan invoke the term, we argue that the 'something' they have in mind is best

described as a discourse. As an effective discourse that ‘goes without saying’, neoconservatism can appear to be an ineffable ‘persuasion’ which ‘manifests itself over time, but erratically, and [is] one whose meaning we clearly glimpse only in retrospect’ (Kristol, 2008). Thus our reconceptualisation of neoconservatism as a discourse is not merely for semantic change; it better denotes its being and endurance through history.

Fourth and perhaps more importantly, discourse understood in Foucauldian terms ‘is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network’ (Foucault, 1972: 23); it does not consist of a single statement, but several statements which together constitute a ‘discursive formation’ (Foucault, 1972: 38). For Foucault, discursive formations ‘do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known’ (Foucault, 1972: 25). They are historically constituted by a group of statements in accordance with certain rules of formation. However, while ‘discursive formation’ refers to ‘the principle of dispersion and redistribution...of statements’ (Foucault, 1972: 107), this concept has been frequently equated with ‘discourse’ itself, as a noun about an already ‘formed’ thing, rather than about a formative process. In the constructivist literature, much has been said about the (re)production of discourse through power relations and policy articulation, but beyond this general claim we know little about the process and source of specific discursive formations, such as neoconservatism. Some scholars have paid attention to the dynamics of discourse formations, such as ‘the Balkans’ (Hensen, 2006), ‘Europe’ (Diez, 2014), and ‘nuclear proliferation’ (McDonald et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the focus remains on how particular

subjects, agents, and specific texts participate in their discursive constructions and struggles, rather than on how their formations are enabled by other statements or discourses through intertextual relations. In part to address this gap in discourse studies in IR, but more importantly to perform a Foucault-inspired discourse analysis of the intertextual formations of neoconservatism, we now turn to the Foucauldian methods of archaeology and genealogy.

Archaeological and genealogical approaches to discourse reject understandings of history as continuous, progressive, totalising, and deterministic. Archaeology abandons the search for origin and is interested instead in how a discourse emerges and is made possible. Rather than seeing documents and discourses as produced by a transcendental, sovereign subjectivity or author, archaeology believes they form an anonymous enunciative domain or modality that conditions and ‘defines the possible position of [their] speaking subjects’ (Foucault, 1972: 122). Thus, to see neoconservatism as a discourse, we should focus not on the search for a coherent origin in its founding fathers or in the seemingly sovereign subjectivity of ‘neocons’, but on the discursive and intertextual conditions in which neoconservatism is uttered and takes effect. This represents a clear departure from the ‘people’ (and by extension, ‘policy’ and ‘principle’) approach to neoconservatism.

To explore such discursive conditions, we rely in particular on the Foucauldian method of genealogy. According to Foucault (1980: 117), genealogy is a different form of history which helps expose ‘the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc.’. It does so by problematising the present and the apparently timeless; it is ‘a history of the present in terms of its past’ (Bartelson, 1995: 7). But genealogy does not aim to document

what actually happened in history; it is interested primarily in ‘how the present became logically possible’ (Bartelson, 1995: 7-8). The understanding of something ‘logically possible’ through genealogy should not, however, be read as a commitment to discovering direct, law-like causal links between the past and the present. Rather, it is meant to be sensitive to constitutive, historically contingent connections and disconnections. As Qvarsebo (2013: 219) notes, genealogy is concerned with the ‘unexpected and strange connections between ideas, ideals and intentions and their supposed consequences’. This method is thus well-equipped to help examine the discursive conditions under which neoconservatism is constituted.

More specifically, genealogy can shed light on the discursive formations of neoconservatism in the hitherto little-understood connections between two seemingly opposing discourses in the United States: virtue and power. In line with the Foucauldian approaches outlined above, we treat the discourse of neoconservatism as a *broad* social phenomenon. The extreme version of its discursive formations (as exemplified by the Bush Doctrine) may have lost wide public appeal, but the same may not be said about the discourses of virtue and power from which neoconservatism arises. These twin discourses about the American self ‘go without saying’ in much of American society. Instead of being a contemporary Jewish ‘plot’ or harbouring a ‘hidden core of...political thought’ (Thompson and Brook, 2010: 6), neoconservatism owes its emergence and potency to these publicly and repeatedly articulated statements about American virtue and power. If the presence, meaning and constitution of neoconservatism needs to be understood in history, then this history must include the historical interactions and intersections between these almost ‘self-evident’

discourses about virtue and power. In this sense, our position differs from Kagan's assertion that neoconservatism can be traced to an American tradition or character, for the very being of 'America' and its 'character' is already—at least in part—a product of those 'common sense' discourses.

We focus on the discourses of virtue and power because these discourses, as well as 'speaking' their subjects ('neocons'), have together been frequently spoken through those subjects and their works. They represent, as it were, the lowest common denominators in the neoconservative phenomenon. Indeed, their special place in the making of neoconservatism has been hinted at before. Christian Reus-Smit (2004: 14) observes that the neoconservative discourse has been 'syncretic', combining ideas of US primacy (power) with those of democratic peace and the end of history (virtue). Similarly, John Mearsheimer observes that '[n]eo-conservative theory...has an idealist strand and a power strand: Wilsonianism provides the idealism...military power provides the teeth' (Mearsheimer, 2005; see also Ikenberry, 2004: 7; Bacevich, 2005: 71; Heilbrunn, 2009: 226). While these scholars rightly point to the realist and idealist 'strands' that run through neoconservatism, their approaches stop short of further tracing such formations of neoconservatism to discourses of power and virtue, or investigating in depth how this 'curious ideological amalgam' (Reus-Smit, 2004: 14) of neoconservatism comes about.

Others engage with neoconservatism through IR theory, arguing that neoconservatism is a counter-discourse to the 'pathologies of modern liberalism' (Williams 2005: 312) which is believed to have abandoned republican virtue and degenerated into moral nihilism and

multicultural relativism (Owens, 2007: 271-2; Homolar-Riechmann, 2009: 182). Meanwhile, it is also suggested that neoconservatism represents a counterpoint to realist, amoral discourses of power politics (Rapport, 2008: 278). Examining the theoretical foundations of neoconservatism helps both expose its links with and divergence from existing IR theories and account for its unique approach to the place of virtue in foreign policy (Williams, 2005). And yet, in these studies neoconservatism continues to be taken as a given, rather than something whose ontological being and metamorphosis could be fruitfully explored through its discursive (dis)connections with discourses of virtue and power.

Virtue and Power: The Discursive Formations of Neoconservatism

Virtue and Power in the American Self-imagination

Reus-Smit (2004) is right to point out that neoconservatism is a flawed discourse of American power. We add, however, that this flawed discourse is possible not just because of a particular discourse of American power, but also an unreflective discourse of American virtue. Ideas of virtue were central to the founding of the United States. Even before America's physical 'discovery', Enlightenment philosophers projected their dream of a new order onto the yet to-be-reached Promised Land (Greene, 1993: 131). Held up as a beacon of hope to the world, the image of a virtuous America was invoked to set itself apart from a corrupted Europe, but also to justify colonisation as a divine plan or God's covenant with a chosen people.

Discourses of American virtue are neither homogeneous nor static (see Kane, 2008). Over the centuries various religious, political and societal virtues have been discussed and debated in the US. Yet constructions of the United States are not primarily about specific virtues, but about the *discourse* of a virtuous America in general. It is in the latter sense that notions and statements of ‘American exceptionalism’, ‘Manifest Destiny’, the ‘Chosen People’, the ‘American Dream’, and the ‘Indispensable Nation’ have come to co-exist, each capturing particular aspects of this perceived American self. Collectively, they form a powerful discourse (or ‘myth’) about a country founded on, and emblematic of, universal moral principles. While this mythical discursive formation is often referred to as American exceptionalism, it is more often than not about constructing a universal, not just exceptional, identity.

Because the United States was built not on pre-existing ‘American territory’ or by a unitary ‘American people’, but by the convergence of disparate peoples and cultures, it has always been especially in need of ‘representational practices for its being’ (Campbell, 1998: 91). Consequently, this discursive myth has been reproduced and reinforced by the country’s founding fathers, political elites, historians, school textbooks, popular culture, and so forth (Kane, 2008; Hixson, 2008), to the extent that many Americans believe in the myth not only as a commonsensical reflection of reality, but also as a ‘reality’ shared by the rest of the world. ‘America would not be true to itself’, explains Henry Kissinger (1994: 811), ‘if it did not insist on the universal applicability of the idea of liberty’. Expressing certain principles in which ‘most Americans would find little to object to’ (Fukuyama, 2007: 5), the discourses of

universal (American) virtue lay a particular ‘commonsensical’ foundation for neoconservatism.

Yet the constitution of neoconservatism entails not only discourses of virtue but also power. Indeed, power occupied an equally significant place in the making of America, both in idea and in practice. For Americans, who ‘we’ are is in large part defined by how powerful ‘we’ are, not only in Henry Luce’s terms that the US is ‘the powerhouse of ideals of Freedom and Justice’ (Luce, 1999/1941: 171), but also in terms of its material preponderance and its exceptional ability to get things done. America’s preponderance of power built on a longstanding clamour for it. For instance, the United States’ first chief justice John Jay equated a powerful America—exemplified by a unified and well-administered government with a ‘properly organized and disciplined’ militia—with more international friendship and respect (Jay, 1891: 279). In 1780 Thomas Jefferson (1854: 420) proclaimed his desire to see a vast United States envelop the Americas:

...it is impossible not to look forward to distant times, when our rapid multiplication will expand itself...and cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws.

Jefferson's 'Empire of Liberty' would convert 'dangerous Enemies into valuable friends' (Jefferson, 1951:237-8), with those enemies of course principally being the Native Americans.

Thus despite being born from anti-imperial and anti-colonial rhetoric, from the very beginning the United States was an imperial and colonial power which 'preferred a "preponderance of power" to a balance of power with other nations' (Kagan, 2008b: 50). For a fledgling nation visions of primacy could not initially be global in scope. However, with a vast and 'empty' continent to manipulate in their own image, European settlers applied the principle on the grandest possible scale. Preponderant power was always more than a practical tool of the United States. It was deemed a fundamental element of the nation-building process and integral to the national identity. For neoconservatives such as Norman Podhoretz, military power was 'for the United States a sine qua non' (Bacevich, 2005: 74). Power was essential to enabling the United States to fulfil its 'destiny' of becoming a continental hegemon and later the 'leader' of the modern world.

At first glance discourses of virtue appear to sit uncomfortably with those of power, and in early US history there were indeed fears that military power could jeopardise the qualities believed to make the United States unique. George Washington (1837: 220) warned against 'overgrown military establishments which...are inauspicious to liberty', reflecting wider societal concerns over the vulnerability of virtue (Kane, 2008: 12-13). Ever since, the power-virtue divergence has continued to resurface from time to time. As contemporary 'neoconservatives' are well aware, there exist at least two notable tendencies in American

foreign policy thinking: one tendency seeks to downplay military power in favour of an America leading the world by example or soft power (e.g. Wilsonian idealism) or even ‘coming home’ altogether (e.g. isolationism), and the other is a calculated realist tradition of power politics that shies away from engaging in utopian ‘social work’ around the world. These tendencies emphasise either virtue or power, but apparently not both. Yet, amid these well-known tendencies there has always been a longstanding American ‘urge to [both] power and moralism’ (Aron, 1974: xxxi), especially when there is a perceived crisis or threat to the United States. It is in this third tendency, as illustrated below, that America’s dual self-imagination in terms of virtue and power sets the stage for the historical formations of neoconservatism as an influential discourse.

Neoconservatism in the Mutual Constitution of Virtue and Power

The discourses of American virtue and power, for all their apparent tendencies of mutual estrangement, also contain tendencies of mutual attraction in which the rules of the constitution of neoconservatism are on display. To begin with, the discourses of virtue have some built-in appreciation of the importance of power. Indeed power is welded to virtue not so much by ‘neoconservatives’ as by a logic of discursive persuasion *within* the discourses of virtue. We suggest that this persuasion operates on two levels: power as an *entitlement* and power as a *necessity*. At the first level, the imagery of a virtuous United States evokes a sense of entitlement to power and international leadership. A powerful myth in the United States has always been that, as a virtuous people, Americans have a special role or ‘manifest destiny’

towards the global spiritual rebirth (Hunt, 2009: 20). In consequence, the US has a natural right to power, leadership and even hegemony. Jefferson's vision of an all-encompassing 'Empire of Liberty' is a pertinent example of how an image of virtue entails its claim to both power and expansion.

As already suggested, America's assumed entitlement to power was first practiced in colonists' encounters with Native Americans. Acting on assumptions of moral and civilisational superiority, President James Monroe proclaimed that to civilise the 'savage' Native Americans '...the control of the United States over them should be complete and undisputed' (Monroe, 1896: 46). These discourses did not merely describe the world. They constructed the reality *of* the world by justifying a foreign policy that hinged on both American virtue and power. The effective exercise of power helped not only consolidate a discourse of American power, but also reinforce discourses of American virtue. As James William Gibson (1989: 14) puts it: "American" technological and logistic superiority in warfare became culturally transmitted as signs of cultural-moral superiority.... Might made right and each victory recharged the culture and justified expansion...'. And in this process, thanks to domestic American 'institutional ingenuity', such as a federal system and the separations of power, the US was able to become 'both republic and empire' (Kane 2008: 36), thus helping mitigate the political tension between virtue and power.

As well as an entitlement, power has also been conceived as necessary for the survival of American virtue in an otherwise evil world. The construction of a virtuous America necessarily implies the existence of evil and/or barbarism. As Gaddis argues, the Founding

Fathers considered the United States a 'beachhead for liberty' in a world of tyranny (quoted in Fettweis, 2009: 508). Under such Manichean circumstances there is no alternative to power to safeguard American virtue, and only through power can the struggle against evil be won. In Theodore Roosevelt's words, 'the barbarian will yield only to force' (LaFeber, 1994: 226), in keeping with his famous mantra of 'speak softly and carry a big stick'. American power and primacy then, rather than the antithesis of American virtue, is almost its precondition. Virtue and power became one in Podhoretz's (1982) plea that 'the survival not only of the United States but of free institutions everywhere in the world depends on a resurgence of American power', as much as in Franklin Roosevelt's belief in the 'righteous might of the American people' (quoted in Doenecke and Stoler, 2005: 197). Such discursive convergence between virtue and power, though not always recognised as 'neoconservative' in American history, has long provided the logic for contemporary 'neocons' to insist, for instance, that '[t]he best democracy program ever invented is the U.S. Army' (Michael Ledeen, quoted in Bacevich, 2013: 85). This embrace of military power in the name of global democracy promotion is therefore not a recent neoconservative deviation from the American liberal ideal, but an essential part of its discursive logic. Robert Kagan unpacks this seductive logic when he asks:

if the United States is founded on universal principles, how can Americans practice amoral indifference when those principles are under siege around the world? And if they do profess indifference, how can they manage to avoid the

implication that their principles are not, in fact, universal? (quoted in Bacevich, 2005: 87).

If the discourses of virtue contain a clamour for power, American discourses of power also frequently arrive laden with convictions of American virtue. In Luce's (1999/1941: 170) words, 'our vision of America as a world power [must] include[s] a passionate devotion to great American ideals'. Of course, a distinctively realist discourse of power in the US often cautions against moralism and neoconservatism (see Williams 2005), but the frequent need for such cautions testifies to the enduring appeal for the US to use power in the name of virtue, 'in search of monsters to destroy' as John Quincy Adams famously put it. From the outset, many Americans see US power as more than material capabilities 'out there'. It is often deemed a form of power that is soft and benevolent, imbued with a universal moral purpose and responsibility. The Spanish-American War of 1898, for example, was branded a conflict for 'high purpose' which gave 'ten millions of the human race' a 'new birth of freedom' (Republican Party, 1900). Such a discursive fusion of American power with 'freedom'—a favourite embodiment of American virtue—continued with remarkable similarity in Woodrow Wilson's explanation of the United States' occupation of Cuba: 'Not for annexation but to provide the helpless colony with the opportunity for freedom' (quoted in Stelzer, 2004: 9). And of course in George W. Bush's (2003) address on the Iraq War: 'We have no ambition in Iraq except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people'.

Enduring recourse to the language of virtue and freedom is essential not only in justifying the use of military power but to sustaining the latter's very existence. As Kristol and Kagan (1996: 28) warn, 'without a sense of mission, they [Americans] will seek deeper and deeper cuts in the defense and foreign affairs budgets and gradually decimate the tools of US hegemony'. They argue that American power, without the justification and purpose of virtue, would be less likely to survive, hence the need for virtue to remain integral to Americans' understanding of power. Thus despite the widely perceived polarisation between its realist and liberal traditions, the US can rarely be accurately conceived as either a pure realist power or a stay-at-home liberal exemplar. The 'mutual attraction' logic of the discourses of virtue and power suggests that it more often than not needs to be both, so that 'the power of American virtue ensure[s] the virtuousness of American power', and vice versa (Kane, 2008: 15). Rather than running independently or parallel to one another, they become one in a neoconservative synthesis that encompasses both moral clarity and military strength. This is not to say that neoconservatism is America's destiny, or that Americans are an inherently 'neoon nation' as Kagan (2008a) would have us believe. However, by unreflectively representing itself through the discourses of virtue and power, the US lends itself to a syncretic neoconservative persuasion.

At this juncture, it is worth clarifying that neoconservatism is not an automatic, ahistorical construct of two similarly ahistorical, deterministic discourses. With limitations of space we cannot fully examine the historical, disjointed, and sometimes contingent nature of the discursive constitutions of neoconservatism. Yet it is worth noting that these discourses

are formed in history and discursively shaped by events such as the two World Wars, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and 9/11. Such historic events as well as broad social trends commonly stir debates about American virtue and power, and how they should relate to one another in the face of changing modernities at home and abroad. In turn, those debates may give rise to different discursive arrangements of virtue and power, resulting in the formulation of different variants of neoconservatism, realism and liberalism.¹ For example, to ‘neocons’ such as Podhoretz, the Cold War victory and the disappearance of the Soviet ‘evil empire’, by vindicating America’s purpose and moral strength, would paradoxically see the end of the neoconservative project and the ascendancy of realism. At the same time, however, these historical changes emboldened some ‘second-generation neocons’ to agitate for ‘nothing short of universal dominion’ (Krauthammer, 1991: 13).

In short, when opportunities for, and threats to, American virtue and power are conceived differently, virtue and power may in some circumstances part their discursive company. Alternatively, they may result in different permutations or discursive fusions of neoconservatism, some of which may appear more extreme, others more expedient and circumspect, and still others possibly even unrecognisable as neoconservatism as we commonly know it. Yet insofar as the dominant American self-imagination continues to be co-constructed by the discourses of virtue and power, the variations may mean changes in the specific discursive formations of neoconservatism (such as from the so-called first-

generation and second-generation neoconservatism), rather than the end of neoconservatism per se.

A case in point is the de-emphasis of military power and the call for a 'restoration of America's moral authority' after the Iraq War (Obama, 2009: 119). US foreign policy can deviate from the particular version of neoconservatism—what Jacob Heilbrunn (2008: 219) calls 'neoconservatism on steroids'—championed by the architects of that conflict. However, such deviation, as exemplified by Fukuyama's (2007) critique of the 'Bushite' neoconservative foreign policy, does not mean that we are necessarily entering a post-neoconservatism period. A close inspection of Fukuyama's *After the Neocons*, for instance, reveals that he has not defected from neoconservatism altogether, but rather its excessive variant. His call for a 'realistic Wilsonianism' can be seen as a return to what might be called 'baseline neoconservatism'. Being 'good at reading "the moment"' (Jacques 2006), Fukuyama may be a microcosm of where the US is today.

Neoconservatism and Contemporary US Foreign Policy: Bush, Obama and beyond

The Bush-Obama period has become a focus for debates over the continuing health of neoconservatism in US foreign policy and accordingly represents a site from which the analytical advantages of our reconceptualisation of neoconservatism can be empirically expressed. As already noted, Parmar examines the 'neoconservative' personnel and organisations within Washington's foreign policy machinery, concluding that "the US foreign policy of President Obama will not differ greatly from that pursued by George W. Bush"

(2009: 204). While this observation may be broadly correct, the inherent weaknesses of the '3Ps' approach linger in this type of analysis; even if the people and policies of the two administrations exhibit consistency, this does not provide adequate ground for understanding the continuity of neoconservatism.

Most importantly, the '3Ps' approach leaves many questions unanswered: Are those people 'definitive neocons'? With so much inconsistency, which of Bush's principles and policies were 'neoconservative' in the first place, and how many must Obama mimic before he qualifies as a 'neocon'? In short, if many conventional assumptions about what neoconservatism is are so questionable, the task of monitoring or measuring its enduring presence today becomes extremely difficult. This article does not specifically engage with the empirical question of the extent to which neoconservatism has continued in the post-Iraq War period; rather, it offers an improved method by which to identify the discursive mechanisms through which neoconservatism has been, and may continue to be, constructed in the United States.

For many, the so-called Bush Doctrine represented something of an 'historic shift' in US foreign policy (Gaddis, 2003). Ikenberry (2004: 7) for example calls the neoconservatism of that administration a 'new fundamentalism'. Others, meanwhile, see neoconservatism as 'less radical, and certainly less novel than is widely thought' (Stelzer, 2004: 3-4; see also Kagan, 2008a). With neoconservatism seen as a discourse, this apparent disagreement can be reconciled. Understood as discursive formations at the intersection between the discourses of virtue and power, it is easy to see how 'neoconservatism' during

the Bush administration was a continuation of American history and identity, even though this continuity was masked by its foreign policy excess. For example, the Bush Doctrine was animated by the threat of global terrorism and its alleged sponsorship from the so-called 'axis of evil'. During the Cold War, arguably the United States' most influential policy document, NSC 68, was rooted in discourses about the emerging dangers of communism and America's duty to lead the 'free world' to victory. Thus while the specific discursive contexts of 'good vs. evil' may have changed (with varying implications for foreign policy), both were enabled by the longstanding construction of the United States as a virtuous Empire for Liberty with an imperative to exert its power and influence abroad.

The defining foreign policy elements of the Bush period, then, cannot be fully explained with reference to neoconservatism's external logic—to individual 'neocons' or to the emergence of a late-twentieth-century ideology, movement or cabal. Without doubt, key members of the Bush administration facilitated the production of a 'quintessentially neoconservative' doctrine (Boot, 2004: 21) and their role in this process is worthy of analysis. However, the powerful rules of neoconservatism's discursive formations mean that discourses about virtue and power were not only responsible for constructing those 'neocons', but also laid the 'commonsensical' groundwork for American public support for the Bush Doctrine. In this context, American foreign policy of the early 2000s that broadly emphasised both moral clarity and military strength was anything but a fleeting 'neoconservative moment', as the discourses of neoconservatism that underpinned the policy had existed before the Bush Jr. administration and have endured beyond it.

In 2010 Obama outlined an ostensibly alternative vision of the United States' role in the world, citing the importance of complementing military force with international cooperation, diplomacy and statecraft (White House, 2010). This much-lauded 'new security strategy' (Shear, 2010) was widely contrasted with that of his predecessor. James Lindsay argues that '[t]he decade since September 11 has seen two competing US foreign policy visions'. Obama, he argues, rejected 'the core principles of Bush's worldview' (Lindsay, 2011: 765). Others question such observations, arguing that continuations in policy exist between Bush and Obama (for example Lynch, 2014). Parmar (2009: 178) explains this continuation by revealing the emergence of a post-9/11 'foreign policy consensus' in Washington, of which 'neoconservative' individuals and conservative organisations are a constituent part. Across the Right and Left of American politics, Parmar argues, an 'organic ideology' on US global intervention has developed. Homolar-Reichmann (2009: 193) similarly observes that Obama and the Democrats tread 'familiar neoconservative terrain'.

While our approach to neoconservatism as a discourse appears to reach similar conclusions as those of Parmar and Homolar-Reichmann, theirs are primarily reliant upon the conventional '3Ps' approach. Typically overlooked is how unquestioned discourses of virtue and power continue to provide oxygen to neoconservative-style foreign policy thinking. Neither American virtue nor American power were fundamentally questioned with the change of government in 2009, in testament to the discursive foundations of neoconservatism which remain common sense and more or less intact.

The purpose here is not to argue that Obama's policy preferences are essentially identical to those of George W. Bush or, indeed, to any other 'quintessential neocon' one might name; had Obama occupied the White House in 2001 for example it is conceivable that there might have been different US responses to 9/11. However, just as neoconservative continuity does not consist primarily in foreign policy similarities between the Bush and Obama administrations, policy differences between them should not be the benchmark through which to distinguish 'neocons' from 'non-neocons'. Policy variations may occur as a result of changes in historical events and attendant shifts in the discourses of Other/threat. Yet in themselves they do not necessarily denote fundamental *discursive* changes in neoconservatism. What we now know as neoconservatism under Bush is not an archetypical form of neoconservatism, but rather an extreme version of it, conditioned in part by extreme events and pushed by particularly zealous 'neocons'.

As such, Obama's (2007) critique of the execution of the war in Iraq and the decisions made by the Bush administration does not constitute a fundamental break with neoconservatism per se. Understood from a discourse perspective, it could well be a 'dissenting' voice *within* the broader commonsensical discourse of neoconservatism. That said, even as almost all US administrations pay homage to the discourses of virtue and power (or their variants) to a greater or lesser extent, we refrain from simply labelling all their policies 'neoconservative'. Because the term in its popular usage has now been inextricably linked to a particular version of neoconservatism (Fukuyama, 2007: xxvii), it is difficult to simply reclaim the label for broad use without elaborate qualifications. If neoconservatism is

defined in its narrow '3Ps' fashion, clearly not all US foreign policies fall into the conventional 'neoconservative' category. Equally, however, we should be careful not to quickly apply the 'neoconservative'/'non-neoconservative' binary either, as many seemingly 'non-neoconservative' policies measured in conventional terms may well qualify as 'neoconservative' in the discursive sense of the word.

This suggests that neoconservatism has no singular form in history, which explains policy variations within this broadly consistent discursive formation. At the same time, as a dynamic discourse it does set certain outer parameters for foreign policy. Just as early European-Americans did not have to dominate and colonise North America, the US today has the option of withdrawing its presence from 'key' outposts abroad. However the mutually reinforcing discourses of virtue and power, and the 'reality' of the world they help produce, are likely to limit the imagination of truly alternative ways of positioning the US in the world, ensuring a degree of general continuity. The Obama administration's stated shift in policy priorities away from Iraq and Afghanistan towards the Asia Pacific is a case in point. From the traditional conceptions of neoconservatism this 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to Asia exhibits few 'neocon' characteristics, not least in its promotion of deeper US involvement in multilateral institutions. However, at its core it is designed to export the same discursively constructed elements of the American self, in large part through a reassertion of US power and primacy across the region. This was articulated by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her announcement of the rebalance, when she explained that it is intended to ensure 'the best

position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values' (Clinton, 2011).

When Clinton asserted that '[t]he future of politics will be decided in Asia...and the United States will be right at the center of the action' (Clinton, 2011), she articulated the 'truth' of American entitlement to power, and the need to act forcefully and even unilaterally in a region many thousands of miles from the mainland United States. So too does the rebalance stem from a belief in the necessity of American power, to export and protect American virtue through the advancement of the 'beachhead for liberty'. The 2015 US National Security Strategy, for example, asserts unequivocally that:

America must lead. Strong and sustained American leadership is essential to a rules-based international order that promotes global security and prosperity as well as the dignity and human rights of all peoples. The question is never whether America should lead, but how we lead (White House, 2015).

The goal of expanding the reach of the American self, inevitably in tandem with American power, is thus essentially unquestioned by Obama. This is reflected in his admission that while he was no ideological bedfellow of former 'neocon' president Ronald Reagan, he once found himself 'in the curious position of defending aspects of Reagan's worldview'. Obama explains that with the end of the Cold War—which saw the triumph of American virtue and confirmation of US hegemony—he 'had to give the old man his due'

(Obama, 2007: 289). Obama's implicit endorsement of the worldview which sent US resources to Iraq and Afghanistan shines a light on the nature of neoconservatism not as a badge, qualification or characteristic, but as a dynamic societal discourse which is something far more than the '3Ps' approach is equipped to capture.

Obama's continuation of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are cited as particular evidence that his approach to foreign policy has diverged little from that of Bush (Lynch, 2014). For example, shortly after taking office Obama announced the deployment of 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. The use of military drones also markedly increased. Still, there is more to the story than policy similarities alone. Like Bush in 2001 and generations of politicians before him, Obama frames the advancement of US power and primacy as an advancement of a uniquely benevolent American identity:

we must draw on the strength of our values—for the challenges that we face may have changed, but the things that we believe in must not... America will...tend to the light of freedom and justice...for the dignity of all peoples. That is who we are. That is the source, the moral source, of America's authority (White House, 2009).

As ever, the 'moral source of America's authority' was its virtuosity in the presence of barbaric Others and the only conceivable way to 'tend to the light of freedom' is through the expansion of American power, albeit in modified, softer forms.

The point here is not about determining the extent to which the Obama administration can be labelled 'neoconservative'; many avoid such an explicit label while pointing to the retention of backroom 'neocon' personnel and that 'neocon consensus' which steers his policy approach (Singh, 2014; Jackson, 2014). Designating Obama a neoconservative would be 'absurd', suggests Underhill. Yet, to win the argument over the 'neocons' in 2008 Obama embraced and adapted, rather than rejected, the concepts they used. As a result, he 'did not stand outside their "world"' (Underhill, 2012: 4). This shared 'world', presented in the literature as the Bush-Obama foreign policy consensus, is certainly noteworthy. Yet it cannot be detached from the still wider and more encompassing discursively constructed 'world' explored throughout this article.

Obama is unavoidably caught up in a history which pervades the present. When Walter Russell Mead (2011) argues that Obama's liberal style of politics in the pursuit of identical aims makes him 'a more effective neo-conservative' than Bush, he alludes to the power and seduction of neoconservatism as a discourse whose parameters may be repackaged, but not completely discarded. Indeed, Obama has been confident that his deliberate appeals to a righteous and powerful US identity will find a sympathetic domestic audience beyond Washington; in 2010 80 percent of Americans considered the US an exceptional nation (Jones, 2010) and in 2012 85 percent reported the belief that the US is a force for good in the world (Goodenough, 2012). Ultimately, then, this is less about Obama and his administration than about the discursive conditions in the US within which the construction of neoconservatism remains logically possible and, indeed, widely acceptable.

This brief comparative analysis of Bush and Obama reinforces the argument that as a discourse neoconservatism does not have a single face or formation. It revises and updates over time so that it becomes liable to transformation and disruption. As such, the brand of multilateralism espoused by Obama which has seen the US deepen its involvement in ASEAN and the East Asia Summit (Turner, 2014) can be acceptable in the pursuit of a virtuous and powerful United States. Thus when Max Boot (2004) argues that ‘neocons’ such as himself ‘don’t have a problem with alliances. They are [simply] wary of granting multilateral institutions (such as the United Nations) a veto over US action’, he expresses the widespread belief in America’s ‘righteous might’ to export its essential elements.

Across US history this widespread belief, being the product of the mutually constitutive discourses of American virtue and power, has conjured up a world populated by uncivilised, inferior and barbaric Others, rationalising and even necessitating their subjugation in the name of advancing the US self through its superior and self-righteous capabilities. Foreign Others are no longer explicitly referred to as ‘uncivilised’ or ‘inferior’, but the neoconservative logic which underpinned such rhetoric and its attendant actions survives today. Democrats and Republicans have come to share some form of post-9/11 ‘neoconservative agenda’. As our analysis has shown, this is explained less by recent convergences of policy preferences, than by the persistent construction of a virtuous United States with a duty to advance superior power. Thus the presidential election of 2016, like that of 2008, is unlikely to fundamentally disrupt this long history. Unless the twin discourses of virtue and power in the American self-imagination are granted more concerted critical

attention, neoconservatism may remain a powerful and largely unquestioned component of future US foreign policy thinking and practice.

Conclusion

This article began by arguing that neoconservatism has been traditionally conceptualised through the '3Ps' approach which, while useful in certain respects, has yet to produce a satisfactory explanation of how neoconservatism is formed, what it represents, or why its presence is likely to continue. To address these problems we argued that neoconservatism is most meaningfully conceived as a discourse. Specifically, we put forward the case that neoconservatism is constituted primarily by two powerful and pervasive discourses in the US: those of virtue and power. These discourses were crucial to the establishment of the US itself, and to its later expansion and emergence into an assertive international actor. Virtue and power, we argued, have often been inextricable and mutually complementary in the US self-construction, expanding and advancing in the service of each other.

From this theoretical base our aim was to provide a novel and productive examination of what neoconservatism is and how it is dynamically constituted, with the implications for better understanding its change and continuity in American foreign policy. While we tend to agree with others that neoconservatism remains an active force in contemporary US foreign policy processes, we did so on new analytical and methodological grounds. In our analysis neoconservatism and its change and continuity are not judged simply by its external logic, for instance, by the fact that Obama and his allies have adopted

'neoconservative' principles, that 'backroom personnel' from the Bush administration have remained or that the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to linger. Rather, they are best understood through its internal logic and rules of discursive formations.

As so many others before them, Presidents Bush and Obama adhere to understandings of a virtuous United States which must retain superior material power for the survival and exportation of its universal values. The Bush administration implemented extreme and costly policies, with broad American support, in the extraordinary aftermath of 9/11. However contrary to popular opinion, American neoconservatism is not best envisioned as bold, boisterous and brash; its power and influence as a discourse comes from its acceptance as unquestionable common sense (Fairclough, 1992a) and thus its ability to escape critical attention to it *qua* discourse.

In its 'Bush Doctrine' manifestations neoconservatism may have proven politically toxic, but as a particular discursive formation that is used to define the US, it is intoxicating and self-gratifying; it tells Americans who they are in an irresistibly flattering manner. Because this discursive formation 'produce[s] the subject and simultaneously *along with him* [*sic*] what he is given to see, understand, do, fear and hope' (quoted in Fairclough, 1992b: 31, italics in original), neoconservatism as a discourse is productive of its adherents and constitutive of a set of policies. The '3Ps' approach to neoconservatism thus has certain merit. Yet, understanding neoconservatism cannot begin or end with specific people, policies or even principles. Its discursive formations are far more fundamental to explaining its resilience, variations, and continued relevance to US foreign policy. To the extent that discourses of

virtue and power are not necessarily unique to US self-imagination, our approach could help explain why neoconservatism may not be a distinctively American phenomenon (Gove 2004).

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Note

1. For a recent debate on the purpose of American power, see Allison et al. (2015).

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