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Auteur/Author: *Mark Leon de Vries*

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Doelensteeg 16
2311 VL Leiden
The Netherlands
071-5277205
redactie@leidschrift.nl
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Promoting the Present Danger – The Neoconservative Push for Militant Containment

Mark Leon de Vries

In the decades since he left office, historians have come to acknowledge Ronald Reagan, for better or worse, as one of America's emblematic presidents. Even liberal historian Sean Wilentz concedes that Reagan deserves a place among the 'few leading figures, most of them presidents, who (...) have put their political stamp indelibly on their time. They include Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt – and Ronald Reagan.¹ Reagan earned this place in history not just for the policies he enacted as president, but as a symbol of the conservative movement which emerged from the fringes of American politics in the 1960s and 1970s to dominate the American political scene for the past thirty years. Even Obama, while campaigning for the presidency in 2008, drew historical parallels between himself and the Gipper, who, he claimed, 'changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not.'²

The conservative movement which carried Reagan to power was no ideological monolith, but rather an alliance of various ideological and political factions, including libertarians, traditionalists, and anti-Communist defense hawks. Opposition to New Deal liberalism, rather a shared ideology, united these various factions. In the 1970s a new faction drifted towards, and eventually joined, the conservative movement. This small, but relatively influential, coterie of academics, public intellectuals, and policy experts had previously supported centrist liberalism and the Democratic party, but had become increasingly disillusioned with both. Their thinking increasingly turned towards conservatism, and by the 1980 campaign many supported Reagan. Being newcomers to the conservative movement, these 'liberals mugged by reality' were soon labeled 'neoconservatives'.

Although the initial move towards the right of many neoconservatives resulted from opposition to the counterculture and

¹ S. Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York 2008) 2.

² In an interview with the Reno Gazette on 14 January, 2008. See: <http://www.rgj.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080115/VIDEO/80115026> at 18 minutes and 50 seconds. Viewed on: 29 May 2012.

Johnson's Great Society programs, they were eventually most vociferous and most successful in the arena of foreign policy. They advocated a policy of staunch anti-communism, backed up by American military dominance and, if necessary, unilateralism. Such a policy was not only at odds with the post-Vietnam liberal turn towards non-intervention, but also with the then current Republican orthodoxy of *realpolitik* and détente engineered by Henry Kissinger under both Nixon and Ford. Having failed to reform the Democratic platform along the lines they envisioned, by the end of the 1970s many of these erstwhile liberals had aligned themselves with conservative foreign policy hawks within the Republican party. Institutionalized in the Committee on the Present Danger, this alliance supported the candidacy of Ronald Reagan and sought to shape his foreign policy agenda. This essay explores the origins of their thinking on foreign policy and shows how a relatively small group of traditionally liberal intellectuals, increasingly disappointed with the direction of the Democratic party, succeeded in leveraging their influence to put a heavy stamp on the foreign policy agenda of a conservative Republican president.³

³ Those wishing to explore the origins and ideas of neoconservatism further than the outline sketched in this essay are referred first of all to the recent study by Justin Vaïsse, the first to document and convincingly tie together the various strands of political and intellectual history associated with the 'neoconservative' label: J. Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge 2011). Earlier studies include: P. Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (New York 1979); G. Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia 1993); J. Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs 1945-1994* (New Haven 1995); J. Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (New York 2008). An inside view of neoconservatism can be found in I. Stelzer ed., *Neoconservatism* (London 2004). Some observers have erroneously equated neoconservatism with the teachings of University of Chicago political philosopher Leo Strauss, most notably S. B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (Basingstoke 1997); A. Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven 2004). For a critique of this interpretation see Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 271-273.

The Emergence of a Conservative Movement after the Second World War

When the neoconservatives began to drift to the right, beginning in the late 1960s, there already existed a vibrant intellectual and political conservative movement in America. In the postwar decades three major currents of conservative thought had developed, each opposed in its own way to New Deal and Cold War liberalism. While they initially developed more or less independently and differed markedly in philosophical outlook, they developed sufficient political and organizational cooperation to be considered a single coherent movement.⁴ Traditionalists, the first current within the movement, deplored the waning influence of traditional religion and morality and the concomitant growth of mass culture and consumerism. Libertarians focused primarily on economic issues and particularly fulminated against the growing economic influence of the Federal government. Anti-communists, the third current within the movement, foreshadowed the later neoconservatives in many ways. It similarly included many former Marxists and radicals, who considered the struggle with the Soviet Union to be the primary purpose of the United States to which all other considerations were subservient.⁵

Traditionalists, of whom Russel Kirk was the most prominent spokesman, harked back to the ideas of Edmund Burke, the British founder of political conservatism. They wished to return to an idealized and supposedly simpler society of the past and feared modern innovations, both technological, as well as social and political. Instead of the uncertainties of

⁴ N. Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face. Organizing the American Conservative Movement 1945-1965* (Copenhagen 2002) 13.

⁵ The rise of the conservative movement in the second half of the twentieth century has spawned a large amount of literature. For the intellectual roots of the movement, G. H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America – Since 1945* (New York 1979) remains essential reading; A recent, accessible, though somewhat superficial introduction to conservatism throughout American history is provided in P. Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven 2009). Other important works, besides those quoted above, are: S. Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York 1986); G. Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (Boston 1996); D. T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of New Conservatism, and the transformation of American Politics* (New York 1995).

the modern world, they advocated the sureties of traditional religion, morality and social order, which they considered a precondition for individual freedom. Traditionalists were cultural critics first and political theorists – let alone activists – only second. They fulminated primarily against the dangers of modern society and mass culture. While they were critical of government interference, particularly where it concerned the Federal government and its progressive policies of New Deal liberalism, they did not question the necessity of government as such, as many libertarians did. Their Christian philosophy of original sin implied that government was necessary to maintain the social order on which their idealized society of small, traditional communities under the guidance of an almost aristocratic elite was predicated.⁶ By the late seventies and early eighties, traditionalism had been overshadowed by the New Christian Right, which advocated the same traditional morality, but was far more politically active and less elitist.

Unlike the traditionalists, libertarians had no objections to modern capitalism. To the contrary, they believed it to be the ultimate guarantor of democracy and individual freedom. Inspired by the works of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, libertarians advocated a minimalist state, and especially opposed state intervention in the economy, which they claimed would inevitably lead to a totalitarian society.⁷ It is debatable whether libertarianism in fact qualifies as a conservative philosophy and Hayek himself emphasized that he was not, in fact, a conservative. He sharply distinguished personal morality, in which he generally agreed with traditionalists, and political principles, which did not allow the state to enforce any particular morality on its citizens.⁸ In practical politics, however, such subtle distinctions soon became moot, as libertarians and traditionalists shared many of the same immediate objectives in their opposition to New Deal liberalism. Moreover, the kind of *laissez-faire* economics advocated by libertarians had been the dominant tradition in the United States for much of the nineteenth century, thus libertarians might have a stronger claim to preserving America's traditions than traditionalists,

⁶ Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face*, 41-42; B. Farmer, *American Conservatism: History, Theory and Practice* (Newcastle 2005) 47-51.

⁷ Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 5-13.

⁸ F. A. Hayek, 'Why I Am not a Conservative' in Gregory L. Schneider ed., *Conservatism in America Since 1930. A Reader* (Revised edition 1959; New York 2003) 180-194, 184.

who advocated an almost feudal society which had never existed in the New World.⁹

Many of the early anti-communists, like many of the later neoconservatives, had been Communist sympathizers in the thirties. Disillusioned with the Soviet Union under Stalin, however, they immediately turned to hard-line conservatism, rather than Cold War liberalism. They emphasized the imminent threat, not only of Soviet aggression, but perhaps even more strongly of Communist infiltration in American society itself. This obsession first surfaced in the Alger Hiss trials of the late 1940s, which divided America in those who believed in widespread Communist infiltration and those who did not. This culminated in the fifties in the McCarthy witch hunts in which hundreds were imprisoned and thousands lost their job for supposed 'un-American' activities.¹⁰ Anti-communism influenced the broader conservative movement in two important ways. First it heralded the death knell of isolationism, which had dominated the foreign policy thinking of many conservatives up until the war. Perhaps even more importantly, anti-communism, particularly in the immensely polarized atmosphere of McCarthyism, provided a rallying point around which the various currents of conservatism could rally.¹¹

In 1955 an ambitious young journalist founded a magazine that would define the conservative movement for decades to come. William F. Buckley Jr.'s *National Review* soon became the touchstone of conservative orthodoxy, incorporating elements of traditionalism, libertarianism, and, above all, rabid anti-communism.¹² While *National Review* provided a platform for conservatives to explore and debate both their ideas and their practical political objectives, few outside the movement took their ideas seriously. Barry Goldwater's shattering defeat in 1968 seemed to confirm the marginal place of conservatism in America. A little over a decade later, however, conservatism would reemerge as a powerful, even dominant, force in American political thought as well as American policy. Neoconservatives

⁹ Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face*, 46-50.

¹⁰ Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 97-104; Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face*, 59-60; E. Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston 2002) 63-64.

¹¹ Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 123-124, 127-128.

¹² J. Micklethwait and A. Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Why America Is Different* (London 2004) 50-51.

would play an important role in broadening the appeal of conservatism and legitimizing many of its claims.

Domestic Debates and *The Public Interest*

The first generation of neoconservatives emerged from the milieu of the New York Intellectuals. This was a group of public intellectuals, mostly of Eastern European and Jewish descent who, prior to the Second World War, espoused radical leftist, albeit anti-Stalinist, politics. After the war, they mostly abandoned radicalism and supported the ‘vital center’ liberalism that dominated American politics through the 1960s and early 1970s.¹³ By the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s an increasing number of these intellectuals became disillusioned with the results of liberal policies and the perceived drift to the left of the Democratic party. These included respected social scientists such as Daniel Bell and Nathan Glazer, and policy experts, such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who increasingly criticized the inefficiencies of the welfare state and particularly opposed policies specifically supporting African Americans and other minorities, such as positive discrimination and forced integration of schools through busing.

These neoconservatives, initially, were not directly involved in political action. Instead, they developed and spread their ideas through periodical publications. Irving Kristol and Nathan Glazer published the sociological quarterly *The Public Interest*, which provided a platform for the academic substantiation of many neoconservative ideas. Centered around a newly assertive Americanism – born of anti-anti-Americanism, a reaction to the protest movements of the sixties – they developed a set of ‘amorphous and ambiguous’ ideas and concepts in their critique of liberalism, such as ‘status anxiety’, the ‘new class’, the ‘end of ideology’, and, a perennial favorite, the ‘law of unintended consequences’. Their greatest success, however, lay not in the development of any groundbreaking theory, but in forcing ‘the decisive breach in the defenses of the liberal orthodoxy,

¹³ The term ‘vital center’ was coined by A. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Cambridge 1963). On the New York Intellectuals see: M. van Rossem, *Het radicale temperament: de dubbele politieke bekering van een generatie Amerikaanse intellectuelen, 1934-1953* (Utrecht 1983); A. Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (New York 1986); A. M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill 1987).

because they succeeded in stripping liberalism in the public mind of its monopoly of expertise.¹⁴

By the mid 1970s *The Public Interest* had moved so far to the right, that it carried articles by Jude Wanniski, who popularized supply side economics and David Stockman, who would be instrumental in implementing policies based on it under Reagan. Wanninsky and other supply-siders argued that lowering taxes would in fact increase revenue, by increasing economic growth and reducing tax evasion. Instead of their earlier critique of the mainstream social science and its often liberal leaning policy implications, the editors now embraced the most radical conservative economic theory around.¹⁵

If *The Public Interest* provided the intellectual ammunition for the neoconservative movement's attack on liberalism, *Commentary* magazine would come to lead the assault. In his first decade or so as editor of the American Jewish Committee's monthly publication, Norman Podhoretz – one of the youngest of the New York Intellectuals – produced a magazine with a distinctly liberal bent. He even published parts of Paul Goodman's counter culture classic *Growing Up Absurd*, which he praised for making 'the entire enterprise of radical social criticism seem intellectually viable once again.'¹⁶ By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, Podhoretz had followed his friend Kristol into the neoconservative camp.

The Public interest devoted its pages to exploring abstract ideas from the realms of social science and public policy. *Commentary*, on the other hand, directly engaged hot-button political issues of the day. Some of these issues melded with the critique on the liberal welfare state and social planning expounded in *The Public Interest*. The latter, however, was almost exclusively devoted to such domestic issues, while Podhoretz also regularly published on issues relating to foreign policy. Reflecting the Jewish background of the magazine, of many of its contributors, and of Podhoretz himself, the

¹⁴ Hodgson, *World Turned Right Side Up*, 130, 131-157; Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 55, 75.

¹⁵ D. Stockman, 'The social pork barrel', *The Public Interest* 39 (Spring 1975) 3-30; J. Wanninsky, 'The Mundell-Laffer Hypothesis – a new view of the world economy', *The Public Interest* 39 (Spring 1975). 31-52; J. Wanninsky, 'Taxes, revenues, and the "Laffer curve"', *The Public Interest* 50 (Winter 1978) 3-16.

¹⁶ P. Goodman, 'Youth in Organized Society: *Growing Up in America*', *Commentary* 29 (1960) 95-107; P. Goodman, 'The Calling of American Youth', *Commentary* 29 (1960) 217-229; P. Goodman, 'In Search of Community', *Commentary* 29 (1960) 315-323; N. Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir* (New York 1979) 24.

magazine advocated a staunch, unwavering and unconditional support for Israel, particularly following the Six-Day War of June 1967.¹⁷ Soon, however, he expanded the scope of issues to include an equally staunch, unwavering, and unconditional anti-communism and opposition to the Soviet Union.

NSC 68: The Birth of Militant Containment

To fully understand the intellectual and political background of the neoconservatives' militant anti-Communism, we must first take a step back and review the broad developments of American foreign policy, and the ideas underlying it, since the end of World War II. Soon after the end of the war, George F. Kennan, a state department expert on the Soviet Union stationed in Moscow, articulated the doctrine of containment. The central premise of this doctrine was that Soviet power was to 'be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points.' By simultaneously supporting the establishment and economic development of democracies in Europe and elsewhere, Moscow would come under increasing strain, resulting in 'either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power.'¹⁸

Kennan's conception of containment emphasized diplomacy and economic development with a limited military focus on those places which were of strategic significance. Such a policy, he reminded his readers, 'has nothing to do with outward histrionics: with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward 'toughness'.¹⁹ The form of containment that would eventually become US policy, however, significantly differed from this approach. In 1950, Paul Nitze, who succeeded Kennan as director of the Policy Planning Staff, produced a policy paper known as NSC 68, which would serve as the basic underpinning of American foreign policy for

¹⁷ M. Peretz, 'The American Left & Israel', *Commentary* 44.5 (November 1967) 27-34; N. Podhoretz, 'is it Good for the Jews?', *Commentary* 53.2 (1972) 7-14; N. Podhoretz, 'A Certain Anxiety', *Commentary* 52.2 (1971) 4-10.

¹⁸ Kennan initially expounded his containment doctrine in what became known as 'The Long Telegram' (February 1946). The citation, however, are from the article published anonymously in *Foreign Affairs*: 'X' [George Kennan], 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', *Foreign Affairs* 25 (July 1947) 566-582: 576, 582.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 575. Kennan reiterated and emphasized this point in G. F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950* (Boston 1972) 354-367, particularly 358-359.

the next two decades. While also advocating containment, Nitze and his team gave very different meaning to the term. Where Kennan had emphasized internal Soviet weaknesses and counseled patience, Nitze warned that:

The issues that face us are momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself. They are issues which will not await our deliberations. With conscience and resolution this Government [...] must now take new and fateful decisions.²⁰

Perceiving a far greater threat posed by the USSR, Nitze's team concluded that the United States must pursue a 'rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength.' This implied a manifold increase in defense spending. In part as a result of NSC 68, and boosted by the Korean War, the 1951 budget for the military more than tripled, from 13.5 to 48.2 billion.²¹ Although the discussion of political and economic strength is reminiscent of Kennan, in NSC 68 it is military strength which takes center stage. The economic and political component deals mainly with financing and politically justifying the increased military expenditures called for.²²

NSC 68 differed from Kennan's conception not only in its increased emphasis on military superiority, but also by extending the concept of American interests. It would no longer be enough to defend selected strong points and areas of vital interest, but instead any expansion of Communist interest was to be considered equally threatening:

In a shrinking world, which now faces the threat of atomic warfare, it is not an adequate objective merely to seek to check the Kremlin's design, for the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable. This fact imposes on us, in our own interest, the responsibility of world leadership.²³

²⁰ 'NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security (April 14, 1950). A Report to the President Pursuant to the President's Directive of January 31, 1950' reprinted in E. R. May ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (New York 1993) 23-81: 26.

²¹ J. Sanders, *Peddler of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Boston 1983) 56.

²² 'NSC 68', 71-76.

²³ *Ibidem*, 29

As one analyst of NSC 68 has noted, such an emphasis on a ‘perimeter defense, with all points along the perimeter considered of equal importance,’ implied a ‘transfer to the Russians [of] control over what United States interests were at any given point.’²⁴

From Ideas to Policy: Coalition for Democratic Majority and Team B

Astute as such criticism appears in retrospect, at the time few objected to the policies put forward in NSC 68, and they would serve as the groundwork for the containment consensus that carried American foreign policy through the fifties and far into the sixties, until it was discredited by America’s failure in Vietnam. In response to this failure and a perceived decline of American power vis-à-vis the Soviets, Nixon and Kissinger devised a new strategic concept known as détente.²⁵ Détente aimed to defuse tensions and normalize relations between the superpowers, including negotiated limitations on nuclear arms. Conservative defense hawks, who had found even containment too soft, naturally opposed this new orientation. More significantly, so did some hawkish Democrats, who opposed bilateral arms negotiations, as well as the underlying assumption of détente that the Soviet Union might be treated as an equal partner.

The most prominent leader of this faction within the Democratic party was Washington Senator Henry ‘Scoop’ Jackson.²⁶ Although Jackson himself would always remain loyal to his party, many of his supporters and staff from the seventies ended up as neoconservative converts to the Reagan camp. Few, however, had yet abandoned the party in 1976 and united in the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), most neoconservatives threw their support behind Jackson in that year’s presidential primary. The CDM was the first initiative in which the

²⁴ ‘Gaddis’s Commentary’ in: May, *American Cold War Strategy*, 141-146: 142, 145.

²⁵ On détente see, among many others, R. L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C. 1994); J. Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge 2003); J. M. Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford 2004); J. L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York 2005) chapter 9.

²⁶ R. G. Kaufman, *Henry M. Jackson. A Life in Politics* (Seattle 2000).

neoconservatives moved beyond the realms of publishing and ideas and sought to gain direct political influence. Founded in 1972 in response to McGovern's candidacy, the coalition sought to move the party towards the political center. While its original manifesto concentrated on domestic issues and a rebuke of 'new politics', by 1974 the focus had moved to foreign policy, embodied in a report published by a CDM task force led by Eugene V. Rostow (who had served in foreign policy positions under Truman and Johnson) and which also included Podhoretz, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Samuel P. Huntington. The report conceded détente – meaning 'a state of genuine peace with the Soviet Union' – to be a laudable goal for American foreign policy. Under Nixon, however, such a policy had failed utterly 'The pressure of Soviet policy, backed by growing and most advanced air, naval, and conventional army forces, as well as by formidable nuclear arms, is strongly felt (...).'²⁷ As we shall see, this emphasis on the Soviet threat and concomitant American decline would soon become a staple of neoconservative propaganda.

Not Jackson, however, but Jimmy Carter would go on to win the Democratic nomination and subsequently the presidency. The neoconservatives intensely distrusted Carter's foreign policy, particularly his criticism of human rights abuses by American allies and unwillingness to project American power in world affairs. Walter Laqueur evaluated Carter's performance for *Commentary* one year into his presidency, concluding not only that 'the balance sheet on human rights after Carter's first year is thus far negative' but more fundamentally that 'it is difficult to discern any clear idea of America's role in world affairs (...) there is a great deal of confusion as to what America is legitimately entitled to do in defense of its vital interests.'²⁸

Such opposition received a boost when the report of Team B leaked to the press shortly after Carter's election. Team B was a group of 'independent' experts authorized by then head of the CIA George H. W. Bush to analyze classified intelligence in order to 'determine whether a good case could be made that Soviet strategic objectives are, in fact, more

²⁷ E. V. Rostow et al., 'The Quest for Détente: A Statement by the Foreign Policy Task Force of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, July 31, 1974': http://neoconservatism.vaisse.net/doku.php?id=the_quest_for_detente. Viewed on: 29 May 2012.

²⁸ W. Laqueur, 'The World and President Carter', *Commentary* 65.2 (February 1978) 56-63: 57, 63.

ambitious and therefore implicitly more threatening to U.S. security than they appear' to the traditional CIA analysts.²⁹ Neoconservatives and their sympathizers dominated its personnel. The team leader was Richard Pipes, a hard line anti-Communist professor of Russian history at Harvard, adviser to Henry Jackson and soon to be regular contributor to *Commentary*. It also included NSC 68 author Nitze and another Jackson protégée, Paul Wolfowitz. Neoconservatives had long harped on the threat posed to America by Communism and the Soviet Union and Team B not surprisingly concluded that intelligence reports through 1975 'substantially misperceived the motivations behind Soviet strategic programs, and thereby tended consistently to underestimate their intensity, scope, and implicit threat.'³⁰

Although Team B's findings have since been criticized, neoconservatives at the time (and since) found in them a welcome substantiation for the aggressive foreign policy they had always advocated. In July of 1977 *Commentary* published a long article by Pipes, in which he faulted 'the refusal of America's "sophisticated" elite to accept the reality of a Soviet threat.' Soviet nuclear strategy was not simply aimed at mutual deterrence and a maintenance of the status quo, but, if they felt an opportunity presented itself, at fighting and winning an nuclear war. He insisted that the only effective deterrence to this threat lay in a numerical superiority in nuclear arms, which any arms limitation treaty would undermine.³¹

Kirkpatrick's Double Standards

Neoconservatives continued to critique Carter's foreign policy, culminating in 1979 in the most famous and influential article ever to appear in *Commentary*. CDM co-founder and Jackson supporter Kirkpatrick, a Georgetown University professor of government was a Scoop Jackson Democrat, who had served on the 1976 party platform committee. She

²⁹ 'Intelligence Community Experiment in Competitive Analysis. Soviet Strategic Objectives, An Alternative View. Report of Team "B" December 1976,' <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB139/nitze10.pdf>, iii., Viewed on: 29 May, 2012.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 1.

³¹ R. Pipes, 'Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War', *Commentary* 64.1 (July 1977) 21-34.

shared the neoconservatives' views on foreign policy and her article 'Dictatorships and Double Standards' would establish her as the movements central ideologue and catapult her into the Republican party, first as a foreign policy adviser to candidate Reagan and later as his ambassador to the United Nations.

While Laqueur had seen some successes mixed with failures and advocated a critical wait-and-see attitude, Kirkpatrick's article opened on a damningly critical note: 'The failure of the Carter administration's foreign policy is now clear to everyone except its architects, and even they must entertain private doubts, from time to time (...)' Kirkpatrick particularly blamed Carter for recent events in Iran and Nicaragua, where regimes closely allied to America had been overthrown by revolutionary forces opposed to the United States, and, in the case of Nicaragua, supported by the Soviet Union. She placed the blame for these developments on the Carter administration, which refused to unconditionally support its authoritarian allies, instead urging them to reform and democratize. This was, Kirkpatrick argued, typical of liberal hypocrisy, which criticized human rights abuses by traditional autocracies, while ignoring such abuses in Communist countries – the double standards referred to in the title. As a result, the United States has 'assisted the coming to power of new regimes in which ordinary people enjoy fewer freedoms and less personal security than under the previous autocracy – regimes, moreover, hostile to American interests and policies.' Such 'traditional autocracies' would have at least the potential to gradually develop towards democracy, while there 'is no instance of a revolutionary "socialist" or Communist society being democratized.' Supporting such traditional autocracies was not only in the best interest of the United States, but also of the local population, since 'the miseries of traditional life are familiar, [therefore] they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope.'³²

Kirkpatrick's essay thrilled conservatives and neoconservatives alike. She presented a cohesive, well reasoned argument, embedded in current theories on modernization and international politics. Exactly the kind of intellectual justification which the conservative movement often had lacked. As one commentator would write a few years later, she had 'brilliantly broken the mold that had settled around liberal thinking on dictatorships

³² J. Kirkpatrick, 'Dictatorships and Double Standards', *Commentary* 68.5 (November 1979) 34-45: 34, 35, 44, and passim.

and human rights.’³³ Others, including Carter’s former Coordinator of Security Planning, Samuel Huntington, quickly echoed Kirkpatrick’s argument that, ‘if it is a choice between right-wing and left-wing dictatorships there are (...) good reasons in terms of liberty to prefer the former to the latter.’³⁴

Intellectuals become Activists: The Committee on the Present Danger and the 1980 Elections

By the time Kirkpatrick wrote her essay, she and other neoconservatives no longer limited themselves to a battle of ideas. Moving beyond the intraparty organization of the CDM, a number of the most prominent neoconservatives, including Norman Podhoretz, Nathan Glazer, Seymour Martin Lipset, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Midge Decter, had helped found a lobbying organization, called the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), which sought to promote the militant foreign policy and hard-line anti-communism favored by the neoconservatives. Founding member of the committee also included NSC 68 architect Paul Nitze, former Assistant Secretary of State Eugene Rostow, AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer Lane Kirkland, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell D. Taylor, and well over a hundred others from leading positions in business, academia, publishing, civil service, and the military. Over the next few years a number of other prominent neoconservatives joined the organization, including Richard Pipes, Michael Novak, and Richard Perle (another Scoop Jackson protégée). The CPD, however, was not just a club of dissatisfied Democrats. Numerous conservatives and long-time Republicans who shared the neoconservatives’ views on foreign policy joined, including Donald Rumsfeld, William J. Casey, Richard V. Allen, George P. Schultz, and Ronald Reagan.

The CPD was a reincarnation of an earlier organization of the same name founded in the early fifties to help build public support for the militant containment policies of NSC 68. The original CPD thus played a

³³ Max Lerner’s comment in W. Barrett et al., ‘Human Rights and American Foreign Policy: A Symposium’, *Commentary* 72.5 (November 1981) 25-63: 45.

³⁴ S. P. Huntington, ‘Human Rights and American Power’, *Commentary* 72.3 (September 1981) 37-43: 37.

crucial role in forging the bipartisan containment consensus.³⁵ The CPD of the late 1970s aimed to restore this consensus, which had been shattered by the Vietnam War and the subsequent policy of *détente*. The opening words of the committee's first policy statement echoed the alarmist views of the Team B report, the CDM task force, and many neoconservative publicists: 'Our country is in a period of danger, and the danger is increasing. Unless decisive steps are taken to alert the nation, and to change the course of its policy, our economic and military capacity will become inadequate to assure peace with security.' The most important threat remained the Soviet Union's 'drive for dominance based upon an unparalleled military buildup.' This threat could only be met through significantly increased military spending, they argued, as the original CPD had successfully done in the fifties:

For the United States to be free, secure and influential, higher levels of spending are now required for our ready land, sea, and air forces, our strategic deterrent, and, above all, the continuing modernization of those forces through research and development.

The alternative was for the United States to

find [itself] isolated in a hostile world, facing the unremitting pressures of Soviet policy backed by an overwhelming preponderance of power. Our national survival itself would be in peril, and we should face, one after another, bitter choices between war and acquiescence under pressure.³⁶

The CPD differed crucially from the earlier CDM, in that it was bipartisan. The CPD could thus exert greater political leverage, by pursuing its stated policy goals, regardless of partisan affiliations. A few months after its formation, Reagan joined the CPD, and its network would be instrumental in his gaining the support of many hawkish Democrats for his 1980 election campaign. Richard Allen, the only supporter of Reagan's 1976 primary bid to join CPD, was the crucial link in forging this connection. He actively recruited CPD members, particularly Democrats, to join Reagan's campaign

³⁵ On the original CPD see: Sanders, *Peddler of Crisis*, chapters 2 and 3.

³⁶ 'Common Sense and the Common Danger: Policy Statement of the Committee on the Present Danger' [11 November 1976] in C. Tyroler ed., *Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger II* (Washington, D.C. 1984) 3-9: 3-5.

team as advisers on foreign policy.³⁷ One prominent Democratic CPD member initially resisted the lure of Reagan and the Republican party. As late as the fall of 1979 Kirkpatrick published an article entitled 'Why We Don't Become Republicans', citing both ideological and personal reasons for refusing to switch a life long alliance. Only a personal and flattering letter from Reagan himself, who had read her *Commentary* article changed her mind and she soon switched party allegiance, earning a post as U.N. Ambassador with cabinet rank.³⁸

Conclusion

How can we measure the success of the neoconservatives as a lobby in the 1980 elections? Although impossible to gauge accurately, it is rather unlikely they had a decisive electoral impact, considering the nearly ten percentage point advantage Reagan had over Carter and the relative obscurity for most voters of the issues they focused on. The neoconservatives most crucial achievement, instead, was to provide bipartisan respectability and intellectual gravitas to hawkish foreign policy principals before associated with the right-wing fringe of American politics. As Podhoretz himself claimed, a year-and-a-half after Reagan's election,

if the grip of the conventional liberal wisdom and the leftist orthodoxies in the world of ideas had not been loosened by the criticisms of the neo-conservatives (...) Ronald Reagan would in all probability have been unable to win over the traditionally Democratic constituencies (...) whose support swept him into the White House.³⁹

If the importance of the neoconservative in getting Reagan elected is difficult to determine, the importance of his election for the neoconservatives is quite clear. Reagan appointed dozens of CPD members to foreign policy posts in his administration. Partisan politics being what it

³⁷ On Allen's role see: Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 181-183.

³⁸ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 185.

³⁹ N. Podhoretz, 'The Neo-Conservative Anguish Over Reagan's Foreign Policy' *The New York Times*, May 2, 1982, 30-31.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/122049949?accountid=12045>. Viewed on: 29 May, 2012.

is, the most important appointments naturally went to long-time Republicans, such as Allen (National Security Adviser) William J. Casey (CIA director), George P. Schultz (Secretary of State), and John F. Lehman (Secretary of the Navy). Former Democrats, however, were rewarded for their support during the campaign. Only Kirkpatrick received a cabinet level appointment, but others filled posts crucial to the neoconservative program of militant anti-Communism. These included Pipes (Director Soviet Affairs at the NSC), Rostow (Director Arms Control and Disarmament Agency), Perle (Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy), Nitze (Chief Negotiator to Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Talks), and Max Kampelman (Chairman US delegation to CSCE).⁴⁰

Political influence, however, did not automatically lead to the adoption of a neoconservative policy on all fronts by Reagan. Once in power, neoconservatives inevitably had to make compromises and these compromises led to tensions within the neoconservative ranks. Within the administration, Rostow and Nitze supported a negotiated agreement on Intermediate Nuclear Forces (Euromissiles), to the chagrin of hardliners such as Perle, who adamantly opposed all arms negotiations.⁴¹ Neoconservatives outside of the administration maintained an even more rigid stance. Podhoretz, in the 1982 article cited above, praises Reagan for his rearmament policies, but goes on to severely criticize him for not taking more decisive and forceful action in the Middle East and Central America, not coincidentally the two regions Kirkpatrick had focused on in 'Dictatorships and Double Standards.'⁴² Despite increasing evidence of the disintegration of Soviet power over the 1980s many neoconservative intellectuals writing in *Commentary* continued (as late as 1989) to insist on the relative decline of American power and the imminent threat of Soviet power.⁴³ By refusing to come to terms with these new realities neoconservatism rapidly declined as an intellectual force, even as many of its adherents remained powerful actors on the political stage.

⁴⁰ Tyroler ed., *Alerting America*, ix-xi.

⁴¹ Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 193-194.

⁴² Podhoretz, 'Neo-Conservative Anguish', 32-33.

⁴³ J.-F. Revel, 'Is Communism Reversible?', *Commentary* 87.1 (January 1989) 17-24; R. Pipes, 'Gorbachev's Russia: Breakdown or Crackdown?', *Commentary* 89.3 (March 1990) 13-25.