

Sep 21 2010

Neo-Cons, having Declared History's End, Try to Reclaim the Past

LSE Ideas

By Inderjeet Parmar

Having declared that History ended around 1989, it seems that some neo-conservatives are keen also to reclaim aspects of History as 'their' achievement. In particular, it was claimed by a prominent scholar that the Marshall Plan, among other postwar US foreign policies, was a "quintessentially neo-conservative" policy. This was at a recent (excellent) conference of the BISA US Foreign Policy Group at Leeds University.

In later exchanges, the neo-conservative scholar marshalled arch-neo-conservative, Joshua Muravchik, to the cause: Cold War policies, Muravchik argues, "were muscular policies (we were spending roughly 10 percent of our GNP on defense), to which today's neoconservatism is the heir much more than today's liberalism. While realist policy following the First World War led to unparalleled disaster, neocon policies after the second achieved what was arguably the most perfect success in the history of statecraft-our relatively bloodless victory over a foe possessing the most ponderous military machine ever assembled".

Further more, the argument, it is claimed, was endorsed by no less a source than (neo-conservative?) President Barack Obama in December 2009: "the world must remember that it was not simply international institutions-not just treaties and declarations-that brought stability to a post-World War II world. Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms".

I don't think that we are in disagreement about fundamentals: the bigger point is correct: the dispute seems to be over what label one applies to the sources of such cold war policies. Perhaps we shd call it 'liberal-internationalist realism' as neither liberal-internationalism nor realism fully captures the blend.

Neo-conservatism, on the other hand, seems to over play the hand: solid conservatives in the 1950s were frequently opposed to Korea, NATO, Marshall aid, Point 4, the UN. So, to the extent that 'neo-cons' (who were they? Was Paul Nitze a neo-con?) can claim to be heirs of Truman, it was in their liberal anti-communist crusade and in their militancy. That unifies them (whoever they were) with the dominant US national security tendency arguing for US preponderance: the US FP establishment. Since neo-cons were not anywhere close to being the tendency they became in the 1970s and after, I doubt that they can be considered the authors of Truman's liberal internationalist realism: that lies much more closely in the contributions of Dean Acheson, partly of George Kennan, in the post-June 1950 period of militarised containment (so ably documented by Jerry Sanders in *Peddlers of Crisis*), and in activities of a range of elite organisations of which the CFR is a good representative.

The other point of course is that programmes like Marshall aid, but also IMF/World Bank, and even German/Japanese reconstruction, were heavily reliant on the almost two decades of New Deal economic thinking, at the heart of which sat economic and social planning. The recently published excellent book by Jeff Bridoux, *American Foreign Policy and Postwar Reconstruction*, makes the point brilliantly and with powerful historical evidence.

The neocons of today are not noted for their support of such tendencies, even if some of their ancestors might have been relatively liberal on domestic affairs, except McCarthyism. Their general bent was towards economic liberalism/neo-liberalism; that came to fruition in the 1970s in particular and via the Reagan revolution.

Having declared the End of History, neo-conservatives (minus Francis Fukuyama) seem to want to claim their heroic role in its demise.

Guess what? History marches on and simply asserting that neo-conservatives shaped it does not make it so. And the historical record more than amply demonstrates that.

Inderjeet Parmar is Professor of Government at the University of Manchester, Vice Chair of the British International Studies Association and an Associate of the LSE IDEAS Transatlantic Relations Programme. This post first appeared at his excellent [US Blog](#)

This entry was posted in [United States](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).