

# American Neoconservatism

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## Executive Summary

When George W. Bush was re-elected president, if not earlier, neoconservatism took over in the United States. This, at least, is the impression you are bound to get from reading some German papers. Aggressiveness in American foreign policy and ,cowboy‘ capitalism are two characteristics of the ,neocons‘, facets that are symbolic of what ,we Europeans‘ reject. By now, the term neoconservatism is used in such an inflationary and arbitrary way that its meaning is close to lost. According to Jakob Schissler, it is ,used to describe any and all manifestations of current conservatism in the United States‘. Neoconservatism has become a bogey, although many people hardly know what it is about. Therefore, understanding the facts of the matter is necessary, and looking at some definitions is useful.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term ,neoconservatism‘ first appeared in 1960, meaning a new kind of conservatism. However, a neoconservative also is someone who has newly joined the conservatives. In this case, it is not the idea that is new, but the people who support it. Nathan Glazer says: ,The definition of a neoconservative is someone who wasn’t a conservative‘. Irving Kristol even sees the neoconservative as a liberal who has been ambushed by reality.

Norman Podhoretz contradicts Kristol, saying that some of the leading neoconservatives had formerly been radicals, not liberals. Frank Rieger, however, regards neoconservatism as ,one form of fragmentation in liberalism‘. And, finally, Daniel Patrick Moynihan perceives himself and his fellows as ,good Catholics who were excommunicated and who said, finally, OK, we’re Protestants‘.

Yet another definition puts the spotlight on the main actors, referring to their religious, ethnic, or social backgrounds. Here is David Brooks commenting on the opinion that most neoconservatives are Jews: ,Con is short for conservative and neo is short for Jewish.‘ In fact, even many younger neoconservatives come from Jewish families, such as Robert Kagan, Richard Perle, and Paul Wolfowitz. Not without justification, Dan Himmelfarb writes, ,Paleoconservatism is the conservatism of Christians, neoconservatism is the conservatism of Jews‘.

However, the aspect of Jewish origins should not be overemphasized, since there is a great number of Christians among the neocons, such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Michael Novak, William Bennet, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and James R. Woolsey. Significantly enough, most Christian neoconservatives are Catholics.

The attempts at definition hitherto presented particularly concentrate on biographical backgrounds. Nevertheless, neoconservatism should be seen as a political current with a substance of its own. Neoconservatism, like other ideas, has its own mouthpieces in the press. *Commentary*, edited by Norman Podhoretz, especially addresses issues of culture and foreign policy. The journal *The Public Interest*, founded by Irving Kristol, was discontinued in 2005. However, Kristol’s journal *The National Interest* still exists, as does *The Weekly Standard* of the younger Kristol, William.

For a long time, neoconservatives have been arraigned somewhat to the left of traditional conservatism, since they are more open-minded about the welfare state than other branches of conservatism. Old-style conservatives often saw neoconservatives as social democrats who only posed as conservatives. Socially as well as culturally, the neocons still hold their position somewhat to the left of the traditionalist conservative camp. This appears from their connection to the civil rights movement as well as from their positive perception of modernity and their general optimism in dealing with social and cultural changes.

Possibly the most important characteristic of neoconservatism is its boundless faith in the ideals and values of American society, in capitalism as well as in democracy and its institutions. This self-confidence also reveals itself in economic issues: Whereas leftist liberals consider the US economic system the basic evil of social abuses, neoconservatives believe that individual freedom requires an open market.

Without a doubt, the label 'neoconservative' is mostly used in foreign policy today, where neoconservatism certainly cannot be positioned to the left of paleoconservatism. Even in the Cold War, neocons appeared on the scene as hawks opposing communism. For them, the Soviet Union was a dictatorship similar to Nazi Germany, which had to be eliminated. Ronald Reagan, who called the Soviet Union the 'evil empire' and actively worked to bring about its collapse, became the icon of the movement.

To neocon minds, the fall of Soviet communism impressively confirmed their strategy, which would inevitably lead to the victory of liberal Western democracy. Moreover, assistance is needed wherever democracy and freedom rights cannot establish themselves. Neoconservatives do not consider withdrawal from international crises an option for America. Neoconservative foreign policy not only fights against the isolationist branch of conservatism but also against the US foreign-policy school of thought called realism. The balance of power, which the realists see as the basis of international relations, is confronted by the neocons' idea of a benevolent global hegemony. They argue that international organizations obstruct the ability of the United States to guarantee freedom and safety because they grant even rogue states the right to vote.

One of the neocons' main tasks is to fight weapons of mass destruction. For a long time, states such as Iraq have been regarded as prototypes of this new threat, which deserves reactions different from those to which traditional realists are inclined. Another feature of neoconservative foreign policy is a pronounced sense of mission. What needs to be done now is to spread freedom and democracy throughout the world, as implemented in the United States. According to Charles Krauthammer, George W. Bush's proposition that 'The defense of freedom requires the advance of freedom' is synonymous with neoconservative foreign policy.

From a neoconservative point of view, Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East which is worth protecting, since a strong Israel serves US interests. The same can be read in *Commentary*, a neoconservative journal which is also regarded as the official organ of the American Jewish Committee.

American neoconservatism expresses itself in programmatic writings rather than political activities. After all, for neocons the course of history is determined by certain ideas, which people must be persuaded to accept. To put these ideas into words, e.g. by identifying enemies, is of particular importance. Podhoretz says that merely speaking of a 'war on terrorism', as Mr Bush does, is too simple; instead, the enemy must be given a name. For a pithier term, he suggests 'Islamofascism' and 'monster with two heads – Taliban fighters and al Qaeda on the one and Saddam Hussein on the other side'. Podhoretz calls the war against Islamofascism the 'Fourth World War', regarding the Cold War as the third world war won by the United States.

American neoconservatism must be understood in terms of personality as well as substance; it even has developed its own linguistic features. However, it also raises questions: Is it possible to spread democracy throughout the world, or is it just wishful thinking? Are there contradictions between the goal pursued and the means used?

Holding the neocons responsible for what Europeans do not like about the United States is deadly. Even more deadly, however, are the conspiracy theories spun around the idea itself. They are wrong in fact, and they overemphasize the neocons' influence. The *Spiegel* recently accused the neocons of having toppled the Washington government and taken control of it, a charge which reminds the reader of the idea propagated in Nazi Germany that the Jews were a power operating in the background, controlling the media as well as the government. Even within the US, voices can be heard saying that the neocons only invented the theory of weapons of mass destruction so as to be able to make US policy their instrument and, ultimately, to pursue their Zionist interests. The antisemitic overtones associated with such criticism of the United States and the neocons should make us think.