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0521838347 - America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order - Stefan Halper  
and Jonathan Clarke

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Any veteran of the Cold War trenches will tell you that the reason the war was worth fighting over so many years and in so many obscure venues around the world was that it was an existential struggle. Not only was it a struggle for the usual things that have throughout history compelled men to fight – family, territory, resources, and so on – but, more important, it set our values of human decency against forces whose first instinct was to imprison the human spirit and toss away the key. Such was the titanic scale of the struggle that defeat would be total. When nations were absorbed by communism there was, until 1989, no second chance. For those who ventured into these dark places, morality provided the guiding light.

Turning to the practical instruments that made victory possible, these veterans will tell you that the indispensable ingredients were the availability of U.S. power and the superior performance of the U.S. free market economic model. But the key lesson is that America's most effective weapon was its moral authority. Specifically, this was the sense that America was a force for good in the world – and the other side implicitly acknowledged the truth of this reality. Thus, while military and economic power were indispensable, for victory to be durable, there was no substitute for moral authority.

The results speak for themselves. The Soviet Gulag is no more, the communist deceptions that enslaved minds and bodies for the best part of a century are over, and regime change – though this is not our term – took place in Moscow and in more than a dozen capitals under its suzerainty. All without a single hostile sortie from NATO.

That is, in essence, why we feel this book is worth writing. America's military might, dominant for nearly a century, has attained new, unchallengeable heights; its economic mass remains preeminent. While this is a laudable state of affairs, however, its moral authority is at risk. That is because the policies

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adopted in response to the catastrophic horror of September 11, 2001, have rested on a series of critically flawed premises, namely that the challenges we face are essentially military in character and that military power alone can deliver victory. And while that may be true when barbarian fights barbarian for strips of territory, it is a profound mistake when civilization hopes to emerge triumphant.

This book therefore is about America and about the changes that have come over the country in the past three years. These changes have been incremental, so the drama of the totality may have eluded those of us who live here. But overseas visitors, who love America and Americans, tell us that they barely recognize the country they thought they knew so well. Our context is America's relations with the outside world. This is the arena where we spent our professional careers at the heart of Cold War governments. But our theme is America in the round: What do the ways in which we conduct ourselves with others and the state of our foreign relationships say about who we are as a nation and about the direction in which we are traveling? The book asks Americans to stand back from the emotions generated by that terrible day and to hold up a mirror to themselves, their surroundings, and their relations both within their neighborhoods and with their more distant friends overseas. It invites them to reflect on the changes that have taken place and to question whether these are the qualities and the future they wish America to pursue.

For, consciously or otherwise, in this relatively brief time since 9/11 we have changed as a people and as a society. Sights on our streets include troops in combat fatigues patrolling public places, their weapons at the ready; concrete barriers around government buildings and synagogues; the drastic changes to air travel; flashing highway signs urging drivers to report suspicious behavior; vanity license plates proclaiming "fight terrorism"; and daily reminders on our TV screens of a seemingly permanent color-coded Terrorist Threat Level, subject to inexplicable change as unnamed experts sense movement in the pattern of potential terrorist "chatter."

In America's relations with the wider world, much also has changed. The spontaneous and unrestrained wave of post-9/11 sympathy has transformed itself into anti-Americanism, with its more sinister cousin, counter-Americanism, being made ready in the wings; alliances painstakingly built up over half a century have been deconstructed, and multilateral institutions, most brought into life by American inspiration, have been diminished; our foreign embassies are less and less able to function as accessible havens of American culture but hide behind redoubts and tank-proof chicanes. Americans themselves are hesitant to travel abroad, not surprisingly in the

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light of the many official warnings against overseas travel. When they do, they are often taken aback at the professional or personal hostility they encounter.

Economically, the price on our society has been high. The federal budget is buffeted by ballooning deficits and state governments are reeling from unbridgeable gaps between revenue and spending, a substantial part of these caused by unfunded federal security-related demands; progress toward freer movement of goods, services, and foreign human capital is stalled as a result of onerous visa procedures and tighter administrative processing at ports of entry; in places American products are resisted simply because they are American; and trade agreements with foreign partners are increasingly dependent on non-trade-related issues, including the degree to which they support Washington's foreign policy.

It is on the political front, however, that change has been most subtle and remarkable. A decade ago, it was a proud Washington boast that well-fashioned American policy toward Latin America had moderated that region's love affair with its generals and returned the military to its barracks. Today, the trend in America is in the opposite direction. Few political rallies or speeches are complete without a military accent. The only extraordinary aspect of this is how ordinary it now seems to us, persuaded as we have been to forget that one of the unifying threads of our political culture, exemplified by Washington's resignation of his commission in 1783, has been an avoidance of military intrusion into politics. But now times have changed so that we observe passively when, in defiance of the underlying grain of the American political ethos, movement is in the direction of tighter central control. New bureaucratic structures include a Department of Homeland Security, whose broad remit has stimulated an intense effort by both liberals and conservatives to limit its powers lest it approach those once dreaded security ministries in Eastern Europe that so many Americans worked to eliminate. The Department of Justice sits astride new powers of intrusiveness and surveillance unprecedented in peacetime. Little-known offices within the Pentagon have devised catchall technology for mining electronic information about Americans' daily lives. All this has proceeded in the name of the "war on terrorism."

This of course is the rub. The greatest change is psychological. Today we have convinced ourselves (with a massive assist from cable news and talk radio) that, as Americans, our natural state is war – war that has no dimensions, with elusive enemies who may be equally residents of Damascus or Detroit and with no definition of what constitutes victory and thus with no end in sight. Having absorbed a siege mentality, we live our lives in crisis

mode. “It’s the terror, stupid,” is the defining political slogan. Yet we are left with a stark paradox. Despite the massive application of American firepower overseas and an equally massive diversion of resources toward homeland security, Americans feel not a whit more secure – quite the opposite. Poll after poll shows Americans feeling more personally threatened than at any time in their history.

Our contention is that this state of siege reflects a range of developments – of which 9/11 is only one. To be sure, the events of September 11 demand a decisive and sustained response. This is common ground. But this is only half of the explanation. The full truth is very different. The situation of unending war in which we find ourselves results in large part from the fact that the policies adopted after 9/11, the initial strike against the Taliban aside, were hardly specific to that event. Unlike the policy of containment that evolved in direct response to Soviet moves in Central and Eastern Europe and involved radical new thinking on the part of those involved, the post-9/11 policy was in fact grounded in an ideology that existed well before the terror attacks and that in a stroke of opportunistic daring by its progenitors, has emerged as the new orthodoxy. The paper trail is unambiguous. Minds were already made up. A preexisting ideological agenda was taken off the shelf, dusted off, and relabeled as *the* response to terror. The reality is that it has little or nothing to do with combating terror and in fact may make the terror threat all the worse. An ideology that highlights conventional state-against-state conflict as its one-size-fits-all policy option has been adapted for an era when threats are unconventional, transnational, and non-state-specific. Little wonder that no one feels safer.

This ideology – usually described as neo-conservative, though its adherents who are aware of the negative flavoring of this word prefer the term “American internationalist” or “democratic globalist” – purposefully places the United States on a war footing. Viewing diplomacy as a tiresome constraint on American “unipolarity,” it embraces a risky and adventurous policy that utilizes military power as the instrument of first resort for a wide range of policy challenges. Neo-conservatives (if we may use this term) and their hangers-on lose no sleep that this places the United States in a state of constant tension with the outside world and inclines to a climate of intolerance and conformity at home. Indeed, neo-conservative advocates speak of World War IV, enthusiastically embrace the notion of “neo-war,” and question the patriotism of those who dare to raise questions. Although premised on a formidable internal logic, the neo-conservatives and their cheerleaders in the media are not above reinterpreting or downright falsifying history (they accuse Richard Nixon of being soft on communism) and jumping on passing

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bandwagons to accomplish their purposes. So long as a state of war or a state of crisis endures or can be argued to endure, debate (let alone dissent) is chilled; the alternatives go unexamined.

Our professional careers gave us a privileged position at the heart of the U.S. and U.K. governments' fight against communism. Our philosophic anchoring is a conservative one. We have lived and worked in the same culture from which many of the neo-conservatives have emerged. As often as not we have been colleagues. We have fought many of the same battles that they have fought. We too have locked horns with shadowy emanations of the Soviet Union and seen the inside of the beast; we have been on the ground in North Korea and Cuba, stood in the same trenches taking the incoming fire from European protests over Pershing missiles; we too know our way around the wars and revolutions of Central America; we too know how to defend ambitious aims against the counsels of timidity and defeatism.

But we did so first and foremost in defense of the values exemplified by America's open society. We recognized that cooperation with our allies overseas was the essence of America's strength, not an optional extra or a bothersome constraint. When we rallied to Ronald Reagan's clarion cry of the "Evil Empire," we did not imagine that a generation later we would see the nation embark on a perilous course of power projection and intimidation, treating friends and allies much as though they were Soviet-style satellites. We never supposed that, when we thrilled to Reagan's demand to Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall," we would see a day when new walls would be built in our own society. As we gave the lie to the communist *nomenklatura*, we did not do so in the name of widening differences in our own country. A decade and a half later we never thought to see a small group of neo-conservative policy makers appropriate Reagan's multilayered legacy as though it were their exclusive property and, careless of history, boil it down to a few simplistic slogans. We never anticipated the day when Americans, as a result of their interventions around the world, would be held in lower esteem than if they had simply stayed at home.

This is not our memory of how we conducted business in that period nor, as we show below, is it the historical record. Whatever the merits of their service under Presidents Gerald Ford, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, this group has today, in a different time and under a different president, substituted "ideology" for "interests" in a way that has left the nation isolated outside and polarized within.

This is a second reason the book is worth writing. We are at an unusual juncture in American history. The character of our society is in play. The combination of unprecedented technological capability in the U.S. military

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and a formidable set of highly dynamic, carefully articulated ideas advocated by the neo-conservatives has created a treacherous situation. Given their access to military power and the instruments of domestic authority, this relatively small group has the ability to put its ideas of a force-based, war-oriented America into practical effect.

It might be thought that this is a foreign policy issue, that this is a debate on the outermost fringes of the American political universe. That would be a mistake. America's overseas posture has changed the domestic context. Authoritarianism overseas generates authoritarianism at home. By capturing the nation with their vision of permanent external war, the neo-conservatives and their ideological bedfellows on the home front have cast a shadow over our entire domestic polity. As advocates of limited government conservatism, we are dismayed at the flow of power toward the center. In this way, the neo-conservative ideology has outgrown its roots in the foreign policy community. All Americans and their overseas allies and friends are now involved.

Though founded as a reaction to empire – a notion rejected a century ago – Washington's undisciplined rhetoric and awkward diplomacy has left much of the world with the impression that it nurses global ambitions of dominance and seeks to impose a “made in America” version of democratic governance, often overlooking history and local cultural and political preferences. The empires of history vary in reputation, with a bevy of new historians painting them in ever more positive ways, but they share one characteristic: They are, in the words of the poet laureate of imperialism, “one with Tyre and Nineveh.” Literally, they are history. Yet America's founding premise was that it truly was a different political organism capable of resisting the path trod by the imperial powers of yesteryear.

The casualty in all of this, of course, is America's moral authority. As noted earlier, those who negotiated the Cold War in Washington, London, and across Asia and Africa understand the broad support commanded by the American “brand.” In conversation with the Soviets, East Germans, Chinese, Cubans, and the like, there was little doubt about who held the high ground. They simply could not defend the mass murder that had taken place in defense of their ideology. This is why we are dismayed that the neo-conservatives place so little value on this priceless asset and instead treat power – raw, military power – as the alpha and omega of America's interaction with the world. This reminds us of Stalin's cynical question about how many divisions the Pope can field. We doubt that this is the company our nation wishes to keep.

The dramatic American military successes recorded by the world's media – though condemned by many – may lend some specious confirmation to this

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force-centric thesis. But it ushers in the complex nation-building problems we have sought to avoid in Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo, East Timor, and Afghanistan, and this against a background significantly eroded by the collapse of moral authority. Far from being seen as liberators, U.S. forces have encountered hostility and danger on raising the Stars and Stripes.

By any objective measure, recent experience demonstrates that Washington neither understands the technology of nation building nor has demonstrated the will to finance sustained and costly administrative and reconstructive efforts in the places where it has intervened over the past decade. And thus either there must be a compelling rationale for this administration's policy – or that of any administration – that links means to ends identifying realizable objectives or today's neo-conservative policies must be subjected to radical surgery and replaced with new productive and achievable objectives.

Inevitably, this will happen. For this is the other side of our story. We speak of the neo-conservative “moment.” That is, we are talking about something that, so long as the normal checks and balances of the American political genius hold sway, is transient. For the fatal error of neo-conservatism is its lack of a coherent and accurate history. Although presented with biblical authority, the neo-conservative ideology is little more than an aberration. It runs counter to the political society crafted over half a century by Republican and Democratic administrations alike. But like all special interests and temporary infatuations over the course of American history – we are thinking of the “yellow press” that marked America's last flirtation with empire or Clinton's fitful flirtations with “assertive multilateralism” – they run their course. The pendulum swings back.

This book is written in the expectation of that swing of the pendulum. This is the area in which we acknowledge a personal ambition: to help American conservatism swing back to its moderate roots after the detour on which the neo-conservatives have led it. Far too often, contemporary political debate pigeonholes proponents and opponents such that the resulting argument is a simple and unproductive clash of rigid, ideological stovepiped positions. We urge our readers to look beyond these stereotypes at the ideas themselves, but, to the extent that our political orientation is relevant, let us put on record that we approach these issues not from the left, as many have. Our critique arises from the “center-right” and asserts the virtues of the interest-driven, consensus-seeking, risk-conscious policies adopted by American administrations with great success since World War II. They are policies in which alliances and the international process are vital assets permitting the United States additional platforms and contexts to advance its interests.

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We do not write merely to pick logical holes or to tease out minor inconsistencies in the neo-conservative ideology. We do not question the good faith of its acolytes and devotees. We know them well. As hosts and guests, we have joined them on radio and TV programs and shared platforms with them in the conservative think-tanks.

This is neither a work of academic theorizing nor is it inside-Washington payback. There is a need for something much broader. We need to change the questions that Americans are asking themselves. These questions go beyond the events of the moment, however dramatic they may seem at the time – Saddam's capture and the bombing of the U.N. headquarters in Baghdad come to mind. Such events impelled many to ask whether they signify that the administration's policies are either succeeding or failing. Would that it were that simple.

Rather, we as Americans confront complex questions with a trajectory longer than that of a TV image. Many are found in America's current debate over the nature of its global responsibilities, its objectives in the Middle East, the circumstances and modalities attendant to the use of force abroad, the rise of China and India, the integrity of global markets, the tenuous nature of today's foreign policy consensus, relations with multilateral institutions such as NATO and the U.N. that we helped to create, and the vital challenge of how to preserve U.S. credibility in a world increasingly mistrustful of American initiatives.

We believe that the neo-conservatives propose an untenable model for our nation's future. Their recent writings indicate that, as Tallyrand observed about the Bourbons, they remember everything but have learned nothing from the nation's experiences in 2003 in Afghanistan and Iraq. We embrace an alternative based on the interest-focused centrist policies that have guided both Republican and Democratic administrations from 1945 to 2000. At stake is the continuing capacity of the United States to advance democratic ideals and the principles of liberal government on which the United States was founded without unleashing a backlash that will render any short-term gains null and void. This is an ambitious agenda, a worthy fit with America's noblest aspirations. We write in hopes of helping Americans to understand the changes around them, to assess the new structures being put in place, and to stimulate them to action before the ugly hallmarks of our new society become part of our permanent condition, well after the neo-conservatives themselves have left the scene.



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## I

**The Neo-Conservatives***A New Political Interest Group*

The neo-conservatives have become a *cause célèbre* in both American and international politics. Conspiracy theories about their influence abound, but well-grounded accounts remain few and far between. In the coming chapters we set out to demystify the neo-conservatives. We ask how and when they came by that name. We examine their beliefs and objectives and how they reached their positions of influence. We look at their history, ponder their strengths and weaknesses, and assess their impact on policy, on our lives at home, and on our national security.

The neo-conservative story to date spans a period of over thirty years. It is complex and diverse, comprising as it does a fascinating intellectual migration from the left to the right and from domestic to foreign policy. Occasionally, it includes wild-eyed obsessives: Dr. Strangeloves propelling the nation into uncharted waters. But more often we encounter mild-mannered East Coast academics of formidable ability serving conservative administrations in senior positions. The story's climax comes after the moment of national crisis on September 11, 2001, when many of the same people found themselves, half by design and half by accident, in positions of high influence and moved to take charge of America's war machine. We chart their actions from that time forward in some detail.

The conclusion to which the facts of our story unmistakably point is that the neo-conservatives have taken American international relations on an unfortunate detour, veering away from the balanced, consensus-building, and resource-husbanding approach that has characterized traditional Republican internationalism – exemplified today by Secretary of State Colin Powell – and acted more as a special interest focused on its particular agenda. We reach this conclusion reluctantly inasmuch as it implies that

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the American global role, to which we attach great value as a force for good, has not been as effective as it should have been – even when due credit is given for heart-warming successes, such as the capture of Saddam Hussein and progress in Libya. This is a sad event for all Americans and especially distressing for people such as ourselves who have felt comfortable under past Republican administrations and who had been expecting something better. Rather than constituting an enduring trend, however, the facts also suggest that the neo-conservative influence should be momentary and containable. Indeed, one neo-conservative writer has already concluded that the end result of the unipolar policies advocated by the neo-conservatives since the mid-1990s is that “America, for the first time since World War II, is suffering a crisis of international legitimacy.”<sup>1</sup> Providing that the normal democratic checks and balances remain effective and providing that the American people in general and mainstream conservatives in particular see neo-conservatives for the aberration they are and demand a restoration of balance to the nation’s affairs, the neo-conservative influence will gradually dwindle.

Let us now proceed to meet the neo-conservatives. Their movement is not a card-carrying organization. They do not hold meetings or conventions. There is no absolute dividing line between who is and who is not a neo-conservative. Indeed, the word “movement” may exaggerate the degree of intellectual cohesion. Irving Kristol, who accepts the title of neo-conservatism’s “godfather,” prefers to describe neo-conservatism as a “persuasion.”<sup>2</sup> Whether movement or persuasion, it certainly does not apply an ideological straightjacket on its members or an admittance test. There is no Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger or Marshal Mikhail Suslov figure presiding sternly over doctrinal rectitude. No Curia, no Politburo. The neo-conservatives are prolific writers, but acknowledged canonical texts are in short supply. No Bible, Koran, or Torah. Furthermore, corporate media ownership (Fox News, the *Weekly Standard*, and the *London Times* are under the same ownership) has led to some homogenization of views on the right.<sup>3</sup> But to get the reader started, even at the risk of some initial simplification, the following are three sets of headlines that express the common denominators of modern neo-conservatism.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kagan, “A Tougher War for the U.S. Is One of Legitimacy,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2004, p. A17.

<sup>2</sup> Irving Kristol, “The Neo-Conservative Persuasion,” *Weekly Standard*, August 25, 2003, pp. 23–25.

<sup>3</sup> James Fallows, “The Age of Murdoch,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2003, p. 90.