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OUGHT THE NEO-CONS BE PROPERLY CONSIDERED CONSERVATIVES? A PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSE

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Abstract

This essay examines the question of whether the neo-conservatives associated with the current political leadership in the USA ought to be properly considered conservatives. It is suggested that there are (at least) three areas in which the current American leadership is or acts contrary to the principles of intellectual conservatism: 1) the commitment of the American leadership to regime change, 2) the ideologically-driven nature of current American foreign policy, and 3) action by the American leadership that does not recognize the organic unity of society. It is suggested that, far from being described as neo-conservative or influenced by neo-conservative ideals, it is more accurate and appropriate to describe the current American political leadership as being imperialist and militarist.

Article

The prefix 'neo' is usually attached to an expression to denote a new or modern form of some practice or belief. Thus, in the case of neo-conservatism, the practice or belief supposedly undergoing a resurgence or renewal is political conservatism. In the context of the renewed militancy of American foreign policy, it is difficult not to notice the current American leadership or at least influences in the current American leadership being discussed as neo-conservatives, or simply so-called 'neo-cons'. Sometimes this description is applied to President George Bush, sometimes to influential neoconservative think-tanks, although more often to the advisors to President Bush, advisors who have engineered the interventionist foreign policy of the current United States Administration. I want to suggest in this brief essay that the neo-conservative or neo-con epithet is indeed not an appropriate one to describe the actions of the current American leadership, and that the actions of the current American leadership suggest that it is anything other than conservative or neo-conservative.

Symour Lipset¹ has observed that the term 'neo-conservatism' covers a wide range of political views, and is usually used as a denigrating term. One influential writer who is an exception to this, and defines himself as neo-conservative, has been Irving Kristol.² Kristol suggests that the emergence of neo-conservatism is due to the deep disillusionment of liberal intellectuals (with liberal used here in the American sense) and that it is essentially an American phenomenon. Kristol suggests that the concerns of neo-conservatives include a more assertive and interventionist foreign policy, reduction of taxation, diminution of welfare, and arresting the perceived decline in

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family and educational values and standards. It is the foreign policy aspect of neo-conservatism that we are concentrating upon here. The dissonance between conservatism and neo-conservatism over foreign policy is something which has been identified recently by Owen Harries,³ although within this brief essay I hope to expand on this and enumerate some of the specific areas of dissonance.

The tradition of conservatism as a self-conscious political tradition is, ironically, very much a modern development, as prior to the modern era it was difficult to envision that there would be an intellectual tradition other than conservative. However after 1776 and 1789 the prospect of revolutionary thought was one that could be entertained. The writer and politician who is identified very much with self-conscious intellectual conservatism is Edmund Burke, although more recent writers within what might be called intellectual conservatism include Michael Oakeshott, Anthony Quinton and Roger Scruton. It is these writers upon whom I am relying for my conception of intellectual conservatism. [32/33]

What is conservatism, or at least intellectual conservatism? The question ought to be answered cautiously, as the emphasis within conservatism is on practice rather than theory as such. However, within such limitations, it can be argued that conservatism represents a recognition of our connectedness with the past (and the future), and a recognition that change can only be introduced with a view to maintaining the continuity with the past and the future. It is not the case that conservatism is necessarily committed to the status quo. Anthony Quinton goes so far as to separate conservatism from immobilism, that is, a belief in the status quo, and reaction, that is, an attempt to return to the past.⁴ Conservatism is not necessarily adverse to change, but rather believes that change ought to be orderly and peaceful. I want to suggest three ways in which the application of 'neo-conservative' to the current American leadership is inaccurate and inappropriate.

Firstly, the idea of taking action to achieve so-called regime change, which was central to the rationale for the invasion of Iraq, is fundamentally contrary to the conservative outlook. One needs to look no further than the work of Edmund Burke to support this.⁵ Edmund Burke was no supporter of tyranny. He campaigned for the rights of the oppressed Irish and the American colonists. However he wrote passionately against the classic attempt of regime change in France, namely, the attempt with the French Revolution to overthrow the monarchy of King Louis XVI. It was not so much that Burke was a supporter of the policies of the monarch. However the argument of Burke was that the bloodshed and suffering associated with the overthrow of the monarch would be far worse for the people than the suffering endured under King Louis XVI. One of the arguments against the invasion of Iraq was that the suffering that would accompany the post- invasion instability would be greater than the sufferings of the Iraqi people under Saddam Hussein. It is an argument with which Edmund Burke would concur.

Secondly, the foreign policy of the American leadership is very much ideologically driven. In the case of the Bush Administration, this ideology, on the surface, is a democratic ideology. Much of the rhetoric behind the invasions of Afghanistan and

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Iraq was to establish liberal democratic government in those countries, and indeed to establish liberal democratic governments throughout the Middle East. On a deeper level it is arguable that the ideological commitment of the Bush Administration is a fundamentalist Christian one, one which sees the world as a struggle between good and evil, with the United States of America representing that which is good (and Godly). This ideological commitment stands in contrast to the emphasis within intellectual conservatism, which is highly mistrustful of ideology. The conservative writer Roger Scruton,⁶ in particular, has articulated the emphasis of conservatism on practice, emphasizing that the commitment to ideology is one that in the modern era has had disastrous consequences.

Thirdly, the foreign policy of the current American leadership ignores a fundamental tenet of intellectual conservatism, namely, the organic nature of society. The conservative writer who is most noted for articulating this is Michael Oakeshott.⁷ The notion of the organic nature of society is that the working of society is based upon a subtle amalgam of understandings, understandings which have been built up and developed over years of practice. It is very difficult to impose a structure on society from the outside. This was why revolutions tend to fail: what happens is that the existing order is replicated after the revolution takes place. The only realistic prospect for lasting change is where there is an evolutionary change, based upon the confidence of the individuals making up the society. The attempt of the current American leadership to impose a democratic regime in the Middle East ignores this fundamental tenet of intellectual conservatism.

If it is inappropriate to refer to the current American leadership as neo-conservative or neo-con, then what is an appropriate descriptor for the foreign policy as espoused by this leadership? I would suggest simply militarist or imperialist: militarist in that the current American leadership sees organized violence as a valid means to implement its foreign policy vision and imperialist in that the current American leadership sees the world as a valid arena where the United States of America has an automatic right to impose its will. Continuing to refer to the current American leadership as neo-cons or neo-conservatives both misrepresents the true nature of conservatism and provides the current American leadership with an intellectual respectability it does not otherwise deserve. [end 33]

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