

The Neoconservative Revolution in America

By

William R. Polk

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. brought to power in the United States government a remarkable clique of ideologically-driven, intricately associated and carefully prepared men. The Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, on whose board of directors one of them serves, identified them as “a small group of 25 or 30 neoconservatives, almost all of them Jewish, almost all of them intellectuals.” Although appointed to office by the incoming Bush administration, so dramatic was the advent to supremacy of the Neoconservatives that some have called it a virtual *coup d'état*.

To a degree unprecedented in the American political experience, the Neoconservatives now guide the policies of President George Bush and his National Security Council; work in tandem with and under the patronage of Vice President Dick Cheney; virtually control the world's most powerful military establishment; and neutralize contrary opinions in the Department of State. When they were unable, at least initially, to persuade American intelligence organizations to say what they wanted to hear, they founded their own “Office of Special Plans” in the Department of Defense. It is on the Neoconservative map and to their specifications that American foreign policy operates.

Working in conjunction with the Republican leadership in the Senate and House of Representatives, forming close and lucrative ties with major defense contractors in what President Dwight Eisenhower called “the military-industrial complex,” securing

massive funding for their “think thanks” and using the power of office to silence critics, the Neoconservatives today form a virtual government within the American government.

For men of such vast and unprecedented power, directing military campaigns around the world, with operations in over 150 countries, affecting the economic relations among the nations and setting out a program intended to dominate the world of the 21st century, the Neoconservatives are astonishingly still little known.

Who are these men? What motivates them? How are they linked tightly together? How do they draw strength from the Bush administration in the White House, the Republican leadership in Congress and a wide variety of American business? How have they managed to silence their opponents and to convince a majority of Americans that they are not radical revolutionaries but traditional conservatives? What are they now doing and what do they intend to do? These are the questions to be answered in this and succeeding articles.

When the Bush administration came into office, few observers paid much attention to the Neoconservatives. They were mostly outsiders to the traditional Washington “power elite.” Many were former academics; few came into the government like most of the Bush administration from business; and as mainly Jews, few were members of the social and business clubs of the Republicans who tended still to be “WASPs” (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). Outsiders they certainly were, but they had already been adopted by the key “old line” members of the administration. Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had served with some of them in the 1980s in the Reagan and first Bush administrations; then, in the 1990s, while out of office during the Clinton administration, they had worked with them on

projects aimed at shaping American policies for a return to power. In managing the transition from the Clinton to the Bush administration, Cheney used them as his agents and put many of them in key positions throughout the government.

Consequently, although few journalists or members of Congress paid much attention to them in the first months of the new administration, the Neoconservatives were in position when the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 gave them their opportunity. After the attack, they alone of all the men and women around the new president had a plan, were determined to carry it out and were in position to do so. Confused and frightened by the events, President Bush, encouraged by the Vice President and the Secretary of Defense, turned *to them for guidance*, indeed virtually *turned over to them* the reins of government. They avidly seized those reins and plunged immediately into a war of retaliation against the Taliban hosts of Usama bin Ladin's *al-Qaida* movement.

The apparent or at least initial success of Afghan war tended to solidify their influence over President Bush and his team, and, despite their misgivings, over the general staff of the military. Even normally skeptical journalists were swept along. They not only seemed to have answers for all the presumed threats to American security but were catching the wave of public opinion. The Afghan campaign evoked an instinctive patriotic response, was overwhelmingly popular in America and provided a reassuring demonstration of American power.

Useful as it was in consolidating their power, however, Afghanistan and the al-Qaida movement were never the central issues for the Neoconservatives. From the first day after the September 11 attacks, as the clique's leader, Paul Wolfowitz, informed

President Bush, their real target was the regime of Saddam Husain in Iraq. Afghanistan was merely a first step, a sort of trial run, for what would be an almost unlimited campaign – known among the military high command as “draining the swamp” –with projected attacks on Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Iran, Somalia and the Sudan. This was what they had been planning since the 1980s and finally were in position to carry out.

To understand what they planned and why, we must introduce the individuals in the clique, show the sources of their inspiration and account for the intensity of their commitment to reshaping the Middle East and ultimately the whole of the Islamic world. And...beyond.

© William R. Polk November 18, 2003.

William R. Polk is the senior director of the W.P. Carey Foundation. In 1961, President Kennedy appointed him a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State. There, he was in charge of planning American policy for most of the Islamic world until 1965 when he became professor of history at the University of Chicago and founded its Middle Eastern Studies Center. Later he also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Among his many books are *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs*; *Polk's Folly, An American Family History*; and *The Birth of America*.