
THE SHADOW MEN

War in Iraq has helped to create a new American foreign-policy establishment. Neo-conservatives are only part of it

In 2000, a close-knit group of about 20 people took their places in the Bush administration, hoping to overthrow Saddam Hussein and spread American ideas of democracy throughout the Middle East. They called themselves "neo-conservatives" and, for two years, no one paid them much notice.

Now the tyrant has gone, and governments around the world are nervously wondering what this much suspected group of men mean to do next. With Baghdad still burning, the neo-cons' most senior official, Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defence, popped up to say that "there has got to be change in Syria". That comment ushered in two weeks of harsh diplomatic pressure from the Bush administration about the other Baath regime, though Mr Wolfowitz quickly added that "change" did not, in this case, mean regime change.

Such talk rattles chancelleries round the world. Those in power try to be diplomatic about their concerns. But Lord Jopling, a former British cabinet minister, spoke for many when he told the House of Lords on March 18th that "neo-conservatives...now have a stranglehold on the Pentagon and seem, as well, to have a compliant armlock on the president himself."

Robert Kagan, a neo-conservative writer living in Brussels, says "One finds Britain's finest minds propounding...conspiracy theories concerning the 'neo-conservative' (read: Jewish) hijacking of American foreign policy. In Paris, all the talk is of oil and 'imperialism'—and Jews." A member of the French parliament quoted his country's foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, saying "the hawks in the US administration [are] in the hands of [Ariel] Sharon"—a comment seen in some circles as a coded message about undue pro-Israeli influence exercised by neo-cons, most of whom are Jewish, at the heart of the administration.

So has a cabal taken over the foreign policy of the most powerful country in the world? Is a tiny group of ideologues using undue power to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, create an empire, trash international law—and damn the consequences?

Not really. To argue that an intellectual clique has usurped American foreign policy is to give them both too much credit, and too little. American foreign policy has not been captured by a tiny, ideological clique that has imposed its narrow views on others. Rather, the neo-cons are part of a broader movement endorsed by the president, and espoused, to different degrees, by almost all the principals

involved, from Vice-President Dick Cheney down (Colin Powell, the secretary of state, is a notable exception). Strands of neo-conservatism can even be found among some Democrats, which is why it makes sense to think that a new foreign-policy establishment may be emerging.

For the same reason, the criticism neglects the role of others. Near-consensus is found around the notion that America should use its power vigorously to reshape the world. Yet because parts of the neo-con agenda have been adopted by a president who is a mostly pragmatic decision-maker, and because the neo-cons themselves are politically astute, the neo-cons do not have things all their own way. They are powerful in so far as the president listens to them, rather than in their own right. The result is that American foreign policy is becoming a mixture of neo-conservative ideas, the president's instincts—and the realities of power.

How They Grew

To see how this came about, start with who the neo-cons are. It is understandable that they are seen as a clique, because, to begin with, they were. The group started in the 1960s as a breakaway faction from the Democratic Party. This first generation emerged as critics of the liberal establishment of their day; paradoxically, considering their reputation as ideologues, their main complaint was that Democrats had lost touch with the practical results of their policies. The term "neo" (new) was an insult thrown at them by the left, but it distinguished them from "real" conservatives; one of their founders, Irving Kristol, joked that a neo-conservative was a liberal "mugged by reality". Foreign policy was only part of the original neo-con agenda: social policy was at least as important.

The second generation of neo-cons is different. Few are Democrats or former Democrats. They are unapologetic Republicans. And while they retain distinctive views on domestic matters (for example, neo-cons were among the fiercest critics of the former Republican Senate leader Trent Lott, who was obliged to step down for making racist remarks), foreign policy is their focus—partly because their main social-policy proposals, such as welfare reform and the dismantling of affirmative action, have become mainstream.

The second generation forms a clique intellectually and socially, but not politically. Most come from similar backgrounds, whether professors (like Mr Wolfowitz and Steve Cambone, also at the Pentagon) or lawyers (like Doug Feith, the Pentagon's number three, Scooter Libby, Mr Cheney's chief of staff, and the State

Department's John Bolton). They join the same think-tanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) where Richard Perle, perhaps their most flamboyant spokesman, is a fellow. They write for and read the same magazine, the *WEEKLY STANDARD*, edited by Bill Kristol, son of one of the neo-cons' founders. They co-author the same studies (five of the 27 authors of "Rebuilding America's Defences", a highly influential report published in 2000, are in the administration). They are, in short, Washington talkers and intellectuals.

In most other countries, where foreign policy is made by permanent bureaucracies, it would be unthinkable for a small group of professors and lawyers to take any sort of policymaking role, let alone a dominant one. In America, with its traditions of entrepreneurial policy advocacy and political appointees, it is not so odd.

What is unusual is that the neo-cons are so different from the Texan business establishment gathered around George Bush. They also differ from the corporate chieftains the president hired for top jobs, such as Mr Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld (both former CEOs). Many neo-cons backed John McCain, Mr Bush's Republican rival, in the campaign; a few had even supported Al Gore.

So it was hardly surprising that, at the start, neo-cons were merely one among several groups vying for foreign-policy influence—and without much success. On the campaign trail, Mr Bush talked about a "humble, but strong" policy and was critical of "nation-building"—very un-neo-con stances. The dominant foreign-policy voice in the president's early days was that of Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser. Ms Rice's main concern was to improve America's ties with other great powers—a policy that, while part of the neo-con agenda, was hardly uppermost in it.

Even Mr Cheney, who was to become the neo-cons' most powerful backer, seemed to differ from them early on. As defence secretary under the first President Bush, he had supported the decision not to overthrow Saddam in 1991 (to Mr Wolfowitz's dismay). And he was on record as being critical of Israel and its settlement policies—anathema to the most pro-Israeli neo-cons. Even in the aftermath of September 11th 2001, when Mr Wolfowitz went to the president to argue his case that the terrorist attacks showed America needed urgently to address the threat of Saddam Hussein, he was fobbed off.

Intellect Vs Chaos

So how did the neo-cons go from being one group among several to the positions of influence they now occupy? By articulating views that came to seem more important after September 11th 2001—but which many conservatives agreed with even before that.

Neo-cons start with the notion that America faces the challenge of managing a "unipolar world" (a phrase coined by a neo-conservative

commentator, Charles Krauthammer, in 1991). They see the world in terms of good and evil. They think America should be willing to use military power to defeat the forces of chaos. Admittedly, they go on to advocate democratic transformation in the Middle East, a view that is not shared throughout the administration. (This is an extremely radical policy, so not only are neo-cons not 'neo', they are not, in the normal sense of the term, conservative either.) But that apart, their views are not so different from others in the administration.

Neo-cons are also energetic in style, preferring moral clarity to diplomatic finesse, and confrontation to the pursuit of incremental advantage. They are sceptical of multilateral institutions that limit American power and effectiveness; they prefer to focus on new threats and opportunities, rather than old alliances.

Again, these views are not unique to neo-cons. The trends have been visible in American policy since the end of the cold war. Indeed, as Walter Russell Mead of the Council on Foreign Relations points out, opinion in the Republican Party has been shifting for longer than that. The movement away from Euro-centric east-coasters towards Sunbelt conservatives more concerned about Asia, Latin America and the Middle East began with Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan in the 1970s.

These common intellectual roots made it possible for neo-cons to maintain close ties with traditional conservative politicians such as Messrs Rumsfeld and Cheney. Though neither really counts as a neo-con, Mr Rumsfeld signed a letter to President Bill Clinton in 1998 urging him to make removing Saddam Hussein and his regime "the aim of American foreign policy", and the founding document of neo-con policy was the Defence Planning Guidance drafted for Mr Cheney in 1992 during his stint as defence secretary. Written by Mr Wolfowitz and Mr Libby, it raised the notion of pre-emptive attacks and called on America to increase military spending to the point where it could not be challenged. Ten years later, both ideas have been enshrined as official policy in the 2002 National Security Strategy.

The event that turned general like-mindedness into specific influence was the terrorist assault of September 11th 2001. "Night fell on a different world," Mr Bush said. Neo-cons had long been obsessed with the Middle East and with "undeterrable" threats, such as nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists. Traditional Republican internationalists, who had less to say on either count, offered little intellectual alternative. As the old rule of politics says, "You can't fight something with nothing." Mr Bush therefore embraced large parts of the neo-con agenda.

But not immediately. The decision to take on Saddam by force seems to have been made sometime between September 2001 and March 2002. In January 2002, in his state-of-the-union address, Mr Bush invoked the infamous "axis of evil"—which could have been lifted from a neo-con handbook. This February, he gave a speech to the AEI about building democracy in Iraq and encouraging political reform in the Middle East.

How Much to Blame?

Some Europeans seem to think the neo-cons' influence is a direct result of Mr Bush's inability to grasp basic foreign-policy ideas. The recent evolution of American policy does not bear out this patronising view. The new policy was adopted in response to a cataclysmic event. It enjoys support at almost every level of government, including Congress (the main exceptions are the State Department and serving officers in the armed forces). Above all, the new policy is defined by the president himself. The neo-con clique depends on Mr Bush, not the other way around.

Fine, you might argue, but this just shifts the focus of concern from the cabal to the consensus. Whoever formulates policy, it is still, say critics, inimical to the interests of (some) Europeans, international law, multilateral institutions and traditional alliances. Moreover, if policy is run by a coalition of people, of whom neo-cons are just the first among equals, then that raises questions about the stability of the coalition, and whether there are internal tensions waiting to erupt between neo-cons and others.

The worries about America's foreign policy are mostly about means and costs, not ends. Neo-cons want to liberate Iraq, spread democracy through the Middle East and improve counter-proliferation measures. Critics can hardly object to any of these, even if they do not care to focus on the aims as relentlessly as neo-cons do.

Europeans often attribute everything they dislike in American policy to the influence of this cabal. Yet to do so is obviously wrong: the administration's—indeed, America's—disengagement from certain international treaties long predated the neo-cons' ascendancy. It is true that neo-cons are more unsparing than most in their disdain for multilateral bodies that they think act against American interests. But their attitude to "entangling alliances" is pragmatic, rather than hostile across the board. Many, though not all, like NATO because of its role in uniting eastern and western Europe after the collapse of communism. When France and Germany held up a Turkish request to NATO for supplies of defensive equipment before the Iraq war, the administration found a way round the obstacle within the organisation, rather than acting outside it. The neo-cons' main ire is reserved for the United Nations and, sometimes, the European Union.

Clearly there have been big diplomatic ructions in the past year, notably in the Security Council over the second Iraq resolution. But it is hard to blame the neo-cons entirely, or even at all. The French and Russians were responsible for much of the bad blood, while the department largely responsible for American diplomacy in that unhappy hour was the very un-neo-con State.

The one area where neo-conservative influence may really prove inimical to the interests of others is Israel. Neo-cons are among Ariel Sharon's staunchest defenders. Most fear the "road map" will

endanger Israel's security, and will do everything they can to stop it.

On the other hand, the map is itself an indication of the limits of their influence. If neo-cons really ran the show, as they are said to, there would almost certainly be no such map. That there is testifies to the other forces acting on Mr Bush: the State Department, the National Security Council, even Tony Blair.

These forces will continue to influence the president and moderate the neo-cons' power. This could be good or bad. Good in that the wildest flights of neo-con fancy will be grounded; bad if the result is policy incoherence. At the moment, the good outcome seems the more likely.

The Limits of Influence

Iraq is the neo-cons' test case. Military victory has increased the group's influence hugely; a serious reversal could undo it. But successful post-war reconstruction would embolden them to press the president to adopt other bits of their agenda. This does not mean sending troops to Damascus (the neo-cons write what they mean: they have always singled out Iraq, and no other country, for military action). Rather, it means putting pressure on Syria to stop supporting Hizbullah and on the Saudis to stop exporting Wahhabi extremism; and it means backing the internal opposition in Iran to the clerical regime.

But there will be constraints on getting this wish-list through. The neo-cons have waited more than ten years to reform Iraq. They will not lose interest in it, as happened in Afghanistan. But they could be distracted by, say, a crisis in North Korea or on the Indian subcontinent. They could be defeated in Congress over the cost of their plans, especially if the economy falters. Or fault lines could re-emerge with mainstream conservatives over how long to keep troops abroad, with the mainstream, backed by the cautious realists in the armed forces, demanding that troops return home as soon as possible.

Lastly, there is Mr Bush himself. His main concern is re-election, and he has already started to switch his attention back to the economy to avoid his father's fate. That may do more than anything to temper the neo-cons' influence.

European and other governments could add their weight to these countervailing trends if they chose. But, with the exception of Britain, they have not, preferring to demonise the neo-cons as a cabal. This is almost certainly a mistake. The neo-cons are not a marginal group. They are providing much of the intellectual framework for America's foreign policy. Barring a serious reversal abroad, that will continue—and demonising them will merely marginalise their critics. ■

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