BROOKINGS

Was Irving Kristol a Neoconservative?

By Justin Vaisse / 23 September 2009

n April 1991, in the fallout of the Gulf War, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein brutally suppressed Kurds and Shiites who were answering U.S. President George H.W. Bush's call to overthrow him. With America standing by, Saddam used his Army helicopters to ensure the perpetuation of his bloody rule.

Although many in the United States protested, one observer forcefully supported the White House's decision not to intervene at that moment. "There is good reason – perhaps even right reason – for the administration's position," he wrote. "It has to do with our definition of the American national interest in the Gulf. This definition does not imply a general resistance to 'aggression.' … And this definition surely never implied a commitment to bring the blessings of democracy to the Arab world. … [No military] alternative is attractive, since each could end up committing us to govern Iraq. And no civilized person in his right mind wants to govern Iraq."

The observer was Irving Kristol, the so-called "godfather" of neoconservatism. But if that doesn't sound like neoconservatism, it's because, well, it isn't. Kristol's pronouncement was, in fact, plain realpolitik, as far as possible from the pro-intervention hawkishness that characterizes neoconservatism today. This doesn't mean Kristol, who died Sept. 18 at 89, wasn't a neoconservative. Rather, it shows how much Kristol's neoconservatism – the movement he invented, or at least successfully branded and marketed – differed from its descendents today.

In fact, the original strand of neoconservatism didn't pay any attention to foreign policy. Its earliest members were veterans of the anti-communist struggles who had reacted negatively to the leftward evolution of American liberalism in the 1960s. They were sociologists and political scientists who criticized the failures and unintended consequences of President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programs, especially the war on poverty. They also bemoaned the excesses of what Lionel Trilling called the "adversary culture" – in their view, individualistic, hedonistic, and relativistic – that had taken hold of the baby-boom generation on college campuses. Although these critics were not unconditional supporters of the free market and still belonged to the liberal camp, they did point out the limits of the welfare state and the naiveté of the boundless egalitarian dreams of the New Left.

These thinkers found outlets in prestigious journals like *Commentary* and *The Public Interest*, founded in 1965 by Kristol and Daniel Bell (and financed by Warren Demian Manshel, who helped launch Foreign Policy a few years later). Intellectuals like Nathan Glazer, Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, James Q. Wilson, and a few others took to the pages of these journals to offer a more prudent course for American liberalism. They were criticized for being too "timid and acquiescent" by their former allies on the left, among them Michael Harrington, who dubbed them "neoconservatives" to ostracize them from liberalism.

Although some rejected the label, Kristol embraced it. He started constructing a school of thought, both by fostering a network of like-minded intellectuals (particularly around the American Enterprise Institute) and by codifying what neoconservatism meant. This latter mission proved challenging, as neoconservatism often seemed more like an attitude than a doctrine. Kristol himself always described it in vague terms, as a "tendency" or a "persuasion." Even some intellectuals branded as part of the movement were skeptical that it existed. "Whenever I read about neoconservatism," Bell once quipped, "I think, 'That isn't neoconservatism; it's just Irving.'" Regardless of what it was, neoconservatism started to achieve a significant impact on American public life, questioning the liberal take on social issues and advancing innovative policy ideas like school vouchers and the Laffer Curve.

If the first generation of neoconservatives was composed of New York intellectuals interested in domestic issues, the second was formed by Washington Democratic operatives interested in foreign policy. This strand gave most of its DNA to latter-day neocons – and Kristol played only a tangential role.

The second wave of neoconservatives came in reaction to the nomination of George McGovern as the 1972 Democratic presidential candidate. Cold War liberals deemed McGovern too far to the left, particularly in foreign policy. He suggested deep cuts in the defense budget, a hasty retreat from Vietnam, and a neo-isolationist grand strategy. New neocons coalesced around organizations like the Coalition for a Democratic Majority and the Committee on the Present Danger, journals like Norman Podhoretz's *Commentary* (the enigmatic Podhoretz being the only adherent to neoconservatism in all its stages), and figures like Democratic Sen. Henry "Scoop" Jackson – hence their alternative label, the "Scoop Jackson Democrats."

These thinkers, like the original neoconservatives, had moved from left to right. Many of them, even if members of the Democratic Party, ended up working in the Reagan administration. Others joined the American

Enterprise Institute and wrote for *Commentary* and the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. Moreover, some original neoconservatives, like Moynihan, became Scoop Jackson Democrats. Thus, the labels became interchangeable and the two movements seemed to merge.

But this elided significant differences between them. On domestic issues, Scoop Jackson Democrats remained traditional liberals. In the 1970s, while Jackson was advocating universal health care and even the control of prices and salaries in times of crisis, Kristol was promoting supply-side economics and consulting for business associations and conservative foundations. On foreign-policy issues, Scoop Jackson Democrats emphasized human rights and democracy promotion, while Kristol was a classical realist. They agreed, however, on the necessity of a hawkish foreign and defense policy against the Soviet empire.

These differences became most visible at the end of the Cold War. Now that the "evil empire" had fallen, what was America to do? Was the defense and promotion of democracy and human rights the reason for fighting the Soviets – or was it the other way round, just a useful tool in this fight? Kristol, who had always taken the second view, logically advocated restraint and pragmatism for post-Cold War America and had these words for some of his "fellow" neoconservatives:

The only innovative trend in our foreign-policy thinking at the moment derives from a relatively small group, consisting of both liberals and conservatives, who believe there is an "American mission" actively to promote democracy all over the world. This is a superficially attractive idea, but it takes only a few moments of thought to realize how empty of substance (and how full of presumption!) it is. In the entire history of the U.S., we have successfully "exported" our democratic institutions to only two nations – Japan and Germany, after war and an occupation. We have failed to establish a viable democracy in the Philippines, or in Panama, or anywhere in Central America.

Although a few other neoconservatives followed Kristol's realist line (Glazer and, to some extent, Jeane Kirkpatrick), for most of the others the idea of retrenching and playing a more modest international role disturbingly looked like the realpolitik that had led to détente and other distasteful policies. The vast majority of Scoop Jackson Democrats advocated a more assertive and interventionist posture and continued to favor at least a dose of democracy promotion (most notably Joshua Muravchik, Ben Wattenberg, Carl Gershman, Michael Ledeen, Elliott Abrams, Podhoretz, and others). Their legacy would prevail.

Thus, the neocons – the third wave – were born in the mid-1990s. Their immediate predecessors, more so than the original neoconservatives, provided inspiration. But they developed their ideas in a new context

where America had much more relative power. And this time, they were firmly planted on the Republican side of the spectrum.

Kristol's son, Bill, played a leading role, along with Robert Kagan, in this resurrection through two initiatives he launched – the *Weekly Standard* magazine and the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a small advocacy think tank. Bill Kristol and Kagan initially rejected the "neoconservative" appellation, preferring "neo-Reaganism." But the kinship with the second age, that of the Scoop Jackson Democrats, was undeniable, and there was a strong resemblance in terms of organizational forms and influence on public opinion. Hence the neoconservative label stuck.

The main beliefs of the neocons – originated in a 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article by Kagan and Bill Kristol, reiterated by PNAC, and promulgated more recently by the Foreign Policy Initiative – are well-known. American power is a force for good; the United States should shape the world, lest it be shaped by inimical interests; it should do so unilaterally if necessary; the danger is to do too little, not too much; the expansion of democracy advances U.S. interests.

But what was Irving Kristol's view on these principles and on their application? Toward the end of his life, the elder Kristol tried to triangulate between his position and that of most neocons, arguing in 2003 that there exists "no set of neoconservative beliefs concerning foreign policy, only a set of attitudes" (including patriotism and the rejection of world government), and minimizing democracy promotion. But at this point, the movement's center of gravity was clearly more interventionist and confident of the ability to enact (democratic) change through the application of American power than Kristol could countenance. He kept silent on the 2003 invasion of Iraq, while the Scoop Jackson Democrats and third-wave neocons cheered.

Thus, ironically, when most people repeat the line about Kristol being "the godfather of neoconservatism," they assume he was a neocon in the modern sense. But this ignores his realist foreign policy – while also obscuring the impressive intellectual and political legacy he leaves behind him on domestic issues.