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The Neocons Are Responsible for Trumpism

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The possibility that Donald Trump will win the Republican party's presidential nomination has inspired leading neoconservatives like Eliot A. Cohen, Robert Kagan and Max Boot to insist that they will never support him. But the neoconservatives of a generation ago like Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz are themselves partly to blame for the rise of Trump-style national populism in the United States. By spurning their natural constituency—the mostly-white working class—the neoconservative leadership deprived a substantial portion of the American electorate of its own sympathetic, moderating and technocratic intelligentsia.

As a result, in the last quarter century many of the blue collar voters who had been integrated into the FDR-to-LBJ Democrats and then became “Reagan Democrats” in the 1980s have had no intellectuals or policy wonks of their own, no think tanks and magazines that respected their values and interests. Organized labor, which once represented their interests, is nearly extinct outside of the public sector. The cultural left despises and vilifies working-class white men as privileged bigots, period. Neoliberal “New Democrats” focus on an audience of tech billionaires and Wall Street financiers. Conservatives praise the service of working-class men and women in uniform—but God forbid that the same heroic veterans should ask for a raise or a higher Social Security benefit or try to join a union or vote for paid family leave. Lacking any establishment advocates and sympathetic intellectuals, on left, right or center, many white working class Americans have therefore turned to demagogic outsiders like Trump. Where else are they to go?

Why did the neocons turn their backs on the working class in general, and working-class whites in particular? Many of the first generation of neoconservative thinkers came from working-class or lower-middle-class or small-town families. The two largest working-class groups in the Roosevelt coalition—northern “white ethnics” including Jewish, Irish- and Italian-Americans, on the one hand, and non-elite white Southerners and Southwesterners on the other—were over-represented among early neoconservative intellectuals. There was a working-class Northeastern Jewish contingent, represented by Irving Kristol and others, a Southwestern contingent represented by Jeane Kirkpatrick. Daniel Patrick Moynihan was an Irish-American whose childhood was divided between Oklahoma and Hell's Kitchen in New York City.

Most of the original neoconservatives were “paleoliberals”—Roosevelt-Truman-Kennedy-Johnson Democrats. Some were moderate socialists. They rejected both the identity politics and anti-military fervor of the New Left. At the same time, they rejected the mainstream conservatism of Buckley, Goldwater and Reagan, which for first-wave neocons was tainted by

opposition to the New Deal and support for segregation in the South. Many early neoconservatives had close ties with the culturally-conservative and staunchly anticommunist AFL-CIO.

Within the Democratic party in the 1970s and 1980s, neoconservatives in groups like the Coalition for a Democratic Majority and the early Democratic Leadership Council sought to win back working class whites alienated by the increasing liberalism of the McGovern wing of the Democratic party. For its part, the early Democratic Leadership Council, dominated by Southerners like Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia and Midwesterners like Missouri Senator Richard Gephardt, emphasized a national service proposal that sought to build on the popularity of the GI Bill among traditional white working class Democrats. The early DLC was quite different from the later DLC, the Progressive Policy Institute and the think tank Third Way, which were focused on Wall Street and Silicon Valley, not middle America.

I observed all this in the late 1980s and early 1990s, from a vantage-point as a research assistant to William F. Buckley Jr. and executive editor of the *National Interest*. At the time, there were four distinct ideological movements on the right: paleoconservatives, libertarians, the religious right, neoconservatives and movement conservatives. With the exception of the religious right, which was focused on a small number of issues like school prayer, pornography, abortion and gay rights, and had little to say about economics or foreign policy, each of these movements on the right represented a more or less coherent worldview combining domestic policy and foreign policy.

The paleoconservatives thought that everything had gone downhill with the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, if not with Woodrow Wilson and TR in 1912 or Lincoln in 1860. They wanted to repeal the New Deal at home in favor of some kind of decentralized pre-New Deal economic system. In foreign policy their spokesmen like Pat Buchanan wanted a return to the “America First” isolationism of Robert A. Taft and Charles Lindbergh. The paleocons had their own institutions and journals, like the magazine *Chronicles*.

Like the paleocons, the libertarians favored a minimalist foreign policy and the repeal of New Deal and Great Society programs like Social Security and Medicare. Unlike the paleocons, they opposed government regulation of sex and drugs, and favored mass immigration, which paleocons tended to oppose on racist grounds. The libertarians also had their own separate infrastructure: the Cato Institute, Reason magazine.

The neocons, as heirs to New Deal liberalism, had no objections to Social Security, Medicare or federal civil rights enforcement. Many were first- or second-generation Americans so they tended to be sympathetic to immigrants and opposed to nativism. Nor did most neocons have objections to organized labor; many indeed had backgrounds in, or close ties to, the AFL-CIO and the American Federation of Teachers. Along with working class Democrats in general, for reasons that cannot be simply dismissed as racist, many neocon intellectuals worried about means-tested welfare programs undermining family formation and the work effort. Neoconservative thinkers opposed both paleocon-style white racial nationalism and New Left multiculturalism, in favor of the centrist liberal ideal of a common melting-pot nationality, which I defended in my first book, *The Next American Nation* (1995).

Of all of the movements on the right circa 1990, “fusionism,” also known as “movement conservatism,” was in the greatest decline. Having launched the political campaigns of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, movement conservative institutions like Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) had lost much of their importance. On the intellectual right, *National Review* and *Modern Age* and *Human Events* had been eclipsed by more sophisticated neoconservative journals like *Commentary* and the *Public Interest* and the *National Interest*, while the Heritage Foundation was taken less seriously than the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute. The attempted “fusion” by the thinkers around *National Review* of three incompatible ideologies—crusading anticommunism, economic libertarianism and social conservatism—into a single right-wing intellectual synthesis had failed. One result by the 1980s had been the emergence of separate libertarian and religious right or “theoconservative” movements outside of the movement conservative big tent.

At the time—remember, we are talking about the late 1980s and early 1990s—I expected all of these movements on the right to wither away, except for the one with which I identified: neoconservatism, defined as paleoliberalism. Everything else on the right seemed to me to be headed for extinction. Old Right paleoconservatism was a cranky sect with a few professors and journalists but no voters. The libertarian movement was funded well by rich people who wanted lower taxes and less regulation. But it was clear to me then, as it is still clear, that the American people did not want to repeal the New Deal and return to the Roaring Twenties or the Gilded Age. As for the religious right, it was evident even in the 1980s that its appeal was limited to a portion of the U.S. population that was in long-term decline, given the social liberalization of Western society. And *National Review*’s fusionist movement conservatism peaked with Reagan’s election in 1980 and by the time he left office it was running on fumes.

I therefore expected that in the 1990s and 2000s neoconservatism in its original paleoliberal version would emerge as one of two dominant ideologies in American politics. The other would be some version of McGovernism, emphasizing race- and gender-based identity politics, hostile to the U.S. military as such and emphasizing post-industrial Green romanticism. In other words, I expected the two wings of the Democratic party of the 1970s to become the next two-party system. Everything to the right of neoconservatism would just die out, like the free silver movement or agrarianism.

In the long run, I believe I will be proven to have been right. In the short run, I could not have been more wrong.

Scarcely had I been promoted to first mate on a ship in the neocon flotilla in the early 1990s than Admirals Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz scuttled their own perfectly seaworthy fleet and hurried over in lifeboats to join the rotting, half-sunk, barnacle-infested ship of movement conservatism. Historians can speculate about their motives for perhaps the most dramatic scuttling since the sinking of the *Graf Spee*. Whatever its causes, the liquidation of the neoconservative movement from within and from above in the 1990s is still shocking, in retrospect. I can’t think of another case in which a dynamic, ascendant political-intellectual movement was abruptly betrayed by its own leaders and subordinated to a much dumber, dying movement. It’s as though Steve Jobs had liquidated Apple and joined Wang.

In any event, between Bill Clinton’s election in 1992 and the rise of Trump in 2015-16, the dominant force on the American right has been what I call Fusionism 2.0. This was even less

philosophically coherent than the original Fusionism 1.0 of the *National Review* crowd had been. Fusionism 2.0 was, and is, a strange-bedfellows alliance of more or less independent movements—the libertarian movement, the religious right, and second wave neoconservatism, which has specialized almost exclusively in bellicose and delusional foreign policy.

On March 3, Jonah Goldberg of *National Review* published an op-ed in USA Today entitled “Trump Redefining ‘So-Called Conservatism.’” Goldberg concludes his indictment of Trump by writing:

“Democrats can’t see it, but Trump represents a massive victory for the left in so far as he’s the first major Republican figure to successfully reject libertarianism, even rhetorically. If Trump is successful, liberty-oriented conservatism will be replaced by so-called common sense statism.”

Now think about how peculiar that statement is. According to Goldberg, Trump is a deadly threat to conservatism because he distinguishes between conservatism and libertarianism. But all schools on the right which are not libertarian by definition reject libertarianism, in whole or in part. To return to the 1980s—movement conservatives, paleocons, neocons and the religious right all rejected one or another aspect of libertarianism, as the pure libertarians of the time, gathered around the townhouse that was then the home of the Cato Institute on Capitol Hill, never ceased to remind anyone who would listen.

Goldberg knows this. I don’t remember him, but Goldberg worked for the *Public Interest* at the time I worked for the *National Interest*, in shared offices. At the time, around 1990, not being a libertarian was not considered a disqualification for being a conservative. And yet now Goldberg claims that even “rhetorically” rejecting libertarianism will get you booted from movement conservatism like the heresiarch of Mar-a-Lago.

But Goldberg in 2016 is not confused. From his perspective, he is correct. He is implicitly referring to the rules of post-Reagan Fusionism 2.0—conservatism as an alliance of single-issue movements, not conservatism as a coherent, multi-issue worldview or movement. Under the rules of Fusionism 2.0, the libertarians of the Cato Institute set the “conservative” line on economic policy, the belligerent neoconservative hawks of AEI set the “conservative” line on foreign policy, and the religious activists of Focus on the Family and similar groups set the party line on social issues.

There are two ways to lose your credentials as a true conservative, according to arbiters of Fusionist 2.0 orthodoxy like Goldberg. One is to question the official party line in one of the three areas—say, by criticizing neoconservative foreign policy, or rejecting libertarian schemes to privatize Social Security or Medicare, or opposing the outlawing of abortion and gay marriage. To be a conservative, you have to sign up for the whole Fusionist 2.0 package, no questions asked, no thinking allowed. It’s not enough to want to privatize Social Security and outlaw gay marriage. You have to want to go to war with Assad in Syria, as well.

But there is another way to be purged from the Fusionist 2.0 establishment. A conservative can be brought up on heresy charges for insisting that one of its three constituents—the libertarians, the religious right and the neocons—change from a single-issue movement in a broad alliance into a full-fledged political-ideological movement with distinctive policy positions on all issues, foreign and domestic.

The libertarian movement has always been a multi-subject movement like this. Libertarians reject neoconservative foreign policy for more restrained alternatives (they don't like being called isolationists). And they reject religious-right moralism and favor sexual freedom and the decriminalization of most or all drugs. So the libertarians get the best of both worlds—they get to have their own movement, and they also get to write the economic policy for the Fusionist 2.0 conservative alliance.

In contrast, the neocons and the theocons are One-Note Johnnies. What is neoconservative policy toward entitlements? Toward the minimum wage? Toward trade? Not their department. Neocons are too busy calling for the escalation of existing wars or the launching of new wars. Domestic policy? Down the hall. AEI, thought of as a neoconservative think tank, has its own Social Security expert, Andrew Biggs. Naturally he is a libertarian who worked at Cato from 1999-2003.

Trump or no Trump, Fusionism 2.0 was bound to collapse. The number of Americans who really, sincerely, passionately want to privatize Social Security *and* invade Syria *and* ban gay marriage is pretty small, if there are any such individuals at all. The same is true of the conservative intellectuals, most if not all of whom are really libertarians or foreign policy hawks or religious conservatives first, and members of the broader conservative movement second. Conservatism is a coalition of movements, it is not a movement itself.

To return to the neoconservatives. By abandoning their own full-spectrum movement in the 1990s, in order to specialize as the resident foreign policy hawks in the Fusionism 2.0 coalition, they dissolved their own winning team in order to join a losing team.

Think about it. Most neocons in the 1980s and 1990s were social liberals or centrists, not social conservatives. The social conservatives have lost every battle since then. Roe v. Wade has not been overturned. The Supreme Court has made gay marriage the law of the land. What have the second-wave neoconservatives gained, by joining the unpopular losing side on these issues?

Then there's economics. For all their doubts about utopian social engineering, the first-wave neocons like Pat Moynihan and Jeane Kirkpatrick and Nathan Glazer and Daniel Bell thought that Social Security and Medicare were triumphs of American social policy. But the second-wave neocons teamed up with the Social Security privatizers and the Medicare voucherizers. What did they gain, from their alliance on domestic policy with the earnest, unworldly followers of Hayek and Mises and Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand? When Jonah Goldberg, champion of libertarianism and "liberty-oriented conservatism," is old enough to be eligible, I predict that Social Security and Medicare will be there for him, in more or less their present form. All those Social Security privatization plans, all those articles about abolishing Medicare with a completely different "market-oriented" system—all for nothing.

And foreign policy, the one area in which second-wave neocons insisted on the deference of other members of the establishment conservative coalition, the one area they reserved for themselves, the one area in which they claimed to be the experts? The neoconservatives who rejected the restraint of Pat Moynihan and Jeane Kirkpatrick and followed the triumphalism of Krauthammer, Kristol and Kagan have contributed to one foreign policy debacle after another: Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Egypt (many neocons cheered when Mubarak fell and was replaced by the Muslim Brotherhood).

We cannot go back to 1990 and take a different historical path. But we can recognize that Fusionism 2.0 took the American right down a dead end alley at ninety miles an hour to crash into a brick wall.

I do not consider myself to be on the right, and I may never do so again. But the U.S. needs an intelligent right that has reconciled itself to contemporary social mores, the modern welfare state and a multipolar world. Serious American conservatives would not waste their energy on deranged crusades to build a global American empire, repeal the New Deal or promote a return to the sexual norms of the 1950s. Those are all crazy utopian projects, of the kind that prudent conservatives are supposed to oppose.

When an intelligent and moderate American right finally does appear it will look a lot more like the first-generation neoconservatism of the 1970s and 1980s than like today's crumbling establishment right. Among other things, like first-generation neoconservatism, the next American conservatism might actually look at the economy from the perspective of the working-class majority of all races in the United States, not solely from the vantage point of the capitalist or the corporate manager.

It is possible to imagine a future American right which would take an approach to the needs of working class Americans different from those of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Cato Institute and the billionaires who fund Republican politicians. Why not? Gaullists in France, Christian Democrats in Germany, High Tories in Britain and Japanese conservatives are all "statists" by libertarian standards. What is "conservative" about immiserating most of your own nation's population by abolishing the minimum wage, flooding the labor market with low-wage immigrants, and lowering the median annual Social Security benefit of \$1,275.28 or roughly \$15,000 a year?

Most Americans are working class people without college educations. If their values and interests are not represented or taken seriously in any think tanks or any scholarly journals or any political party factions, they will find someone to represent them eventually, perhaps a reality TV star. In a crude and demagogic way, Trump is representing a constituency that the original neoconservatives, with their modest social backgrounds and ties to organized labor, once represented in a sober and enlightened way.

Jonah Goldberg cannot imagine a pro-blue-collar American right that is not just donor-class libertarianism camouflaged by flags and Bibles. But I can, because I belonged to such a movement once. It was called neoconservatism.