

The New York Times

A Hawk Takes Flight

Ross Douthat

March 24, 2018

Now that John Bolton has finally ascended from the limbo of the green room to the Valhalla of the White House, we need to settle the first question of his tenure: Is he a “neocon” or a “paleocon”?

I have seen both terms used, the former more promiscuously, to describe Donald Trump’s new national security adviser. But they’re both misdescriptions, and explaining why is a useful way of putting Trump’s foreign policy team (and its distinctive dangers) in intellectual and historical perspective.

Foreign policy conservatives can be grouped into four broad categories. The first group, the genuine *paleocons*, are the oldest and least influential: Their lineage goes back to the antiwar conservatism of the 1930s, and to postwar Republicans who regarded our Cold War buildup as a big mistake.

The last paleocon to play a crucial role in U.S. politics was the Ohio Republican Robert Taft, who opposed NATO and became a critic of the Korean War. Pat Buchanan tried to revive paleoconservatism in the 1990s; The American Conservative magazine and the Cato Institute carry the torch in intellectual debates. But the tendency’s only politically significant heir right now is Kentucky Senator Rand Paul.

Except that even Paul, wary of the label, would probably describe himself instead as a *realist*, linking himself to the tradition of Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon and George H. W. Bush — internationalist, stability-oriented, committed to the Pax Americana but skeptical of grand crusades, and open to working out cynical arrangements rather than pushing American power to its limit.

This cynicism explains why realists have found their chief rivals among the *neoconservatives*, a group best defined as liberal anti-Communists who moved right in the 1970s as the Democratic Party moved left, becoming more hawkish and unilateralist but retaining a basic view that American power should be used for moral purpose, to spread American ideals.

Thus neoconservatives despised the Nixon White House’s *realpolitik*; they cheered Ronald Reagan’s anti-Communism; they chafed under George H.W. Bush’s realism and backed humanitarian interventions under Democratic presidents; and most famously they regarded the

Iraq War as a chance to democratize the Middle East. And then when that war went badly, they became the natural scapegoats...

...Even though some of the most disastrous Iraq decisions were made by members of the fourth conservative faction, the pure *hawks*, the group to which John Bolton emphatically belongs. The hawks share the neocons' aggressiveness and the realists' wariness of nation building; they also have a touch of paleoconservatism, embracing "America First" without its non-interventionist implications.

But the hawkish tradition, from Douglas MacArthur down to Dick Cheney (a realist reborn as a hawk post-9/11) and now Bolton, is distinguished by simplicity: The default response to any challenge should be military escalation, the imposition of America's will by force — and if one dangerous regime is succeeded by another, you just go in and kill the next round of bad guys, too.

Most Republican administrations have placed hawks, neocons and realists in complex internal alignments. The invasion of Iraq, for instance, was championed by hawks and neocons with realists in uneasy and soon-disillusioned support; by the end of the Bush presidency, the hawks had been marginalized and realists like Robert Gates were supervising a neoconservative-hatched strategy, the surge.

Donald Trump's vision, though, promised a different combination, mixing a revived paleoconservatism — hence his NATO skepticism, his right-wing "come home, America" pose — with a realist desire for a Russian détente and a hawkish attitude toward terrorism. Trump made his antipathy to neoconservatives obvious, and they returned the sentiment: The most anti-Trump voices on the right belong to the democracy promoters of the Bush era.

In Trump year one, the paleocon-ish elements in his circle — Steve Bannon, most prominently — were sidelined by H. R. McMaster and James Mattis, and Trump ended up with a realist-leaning foreign policy run by businessmen and generals, with Nikki Haley occasionally sounding neoconservative notes at the U.N.

But Trump didn't get along with McMaster and Rex Tillerson — and he clearly thinks he might like hawks better. So now we have an administration in which both paleoconservatism and neoconservatism are sidelined, and straight-up hawkishness is institutionally ascendant as it has rarely been in modern presidencies — save in the Peak Cheneyism following 9/11.

Boltonism need not be as disastrous as Cheneyism. If a realist like Cheney can turn into a "1 percent doctrine" hawk, then perhaps Bolton can transform the other way, and find a strategic prudence that his "let's fight everyone" punditry conspicuously lacks. Also, Mattis's military form of realism might have a restraining influence over Trump, and Trump's bluff and bluster might not readily translate into okaying the war-on-all-fronts strategy that Bolton has tended to endorse.

But a foreign policy team managed by hawks, untouched by neoconservative idealism and cut loose from Trump's paleocon tendencies, seems more likely than not to give us what the hawkish persuasion always wants: more wars, and soon.

