

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Memo to Leslie Gelb: The Neocons Never Left

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Leslie Gelb writes [3] to warn that:

The neoconservatives who gave America clueless, unpaid-for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus a near doubling of military expenditures, during the Bush years have risen from their political graves.

He worries that:

The only ones to stand up to them effectively have been other Republicans, specifically the best of the foreign-policy realists such as George Shultz, James Baker, Brent Scowcroft, and George H.W. Bush.

There are a few points to be made here. The first is that the neocons never went into a political grave. Instead, they took over the Republican foreign-policy establishment. Think of the list of foreign policy advisers released recently by the Romney campaign [4]. Now try to envision a different candidate Romney who wanted to have his campaign dominated by realists instead of neocons. What names would appear? It's a remarkably hard question to answer.

The irony here is that it was with the help of people like Leslie Gelb that the neocons took over the GOP establishment. When he was at the helm of the Council on Foreign Relations, Gelb brought in a real neocon's neocon, Max Boot, to be a senior fellow, giving perhaps the most fervid neocon around the CFR stamp of approval—the imprimatur of the foreign-policy establishment. (It should also be acknowledged that Gelb himself also supported the neocons' Iraq project, shrugging afterward in the passive voice [5] that his "initial support for the war was symptomatic of unfortunate tendencies within the foreign policy

community, namely the disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility.”)

As Scott McConnell has pointed out, neoconservatism is a career [6]. Or as Bill Kristol remarked in 2005 [7], the neoconservatives have done such an excellent job building institutions and infrastructure for developing the next generation of neocons that “soon there are going to be more neoconservative magazines than there are neoconservatives.” There are dozens of twentysomething, thirtysomething, fortysomething, and older neocons throughout Washington, working at think tanks, editorial pages, in government, and elsewhere. I could probably count on two hands the number of youngish national-security types I know in town who I could strain to call realists. This imbalance among foreign-policy elites helps create the mistaken impression that there are lots of neoconservatives in America generally, which there aren’t. Neoconservatism really is a head without a body [8].

Now think about Gelb’s list of the people who have historically been able to resist neoconservative pressure. They’re all in their eighties.

If Gelb is worried about the failure to drive a stake through the heart of neoconservatism, he ought to think long and hard about the failures of the elders in the Washington-realist establishment to develop the next generation of non-neocon national security leaders. Those “unfortunate tendencies within the foreign policy community” that he laments are still there, and aspiring leaders are subject to them even more than presidents of the Council on Foreign Relations were.