



Twilight of the neoconservatives

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In the early winter months of 1998, in a series of drab meeting rooms in the Rayburn House Office Building near the Capitol in Washington, DC, a group of dissident conservative intellectuals, a tweeded and mostly forgotten faction of foreign policy thinkers calling themselves neoconservatives, scored the first in a series of surprise political coups that would lead them to the heights of power — and, within a few years, change the world.

The meeting rooms held what House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Sen. Bob Dole called the Congressional Policy Advisory Board. Gingrich had helped lead a Republican revolution in Congress a few years earlier, but the party had struggled to offer a substantive alternative to the Clinton administration, as Dole's failed 1996 presidential campaign had shown. They had recruited a new generation of Republicans, and now, with the policy board, they would to give those recruits an ideology.

The neoconservatives were unlikely candidates for Gingrich and Dole's project. Largely creatures of policy journals and university campuses, they had lost one debate after another during the Reagan and George H.W. Bush eras. Their agenda, tailored to the Cold War, had little obvious relevance to a post-Soviet world.

But in the mid-1990s, a small group of new-generation neoconservatives had busied themselves with remaking the movement, now focused on the Middle East rather than Europe. They fought for influence in conservative journals and think tanks, for the ears of congressional leaders and, eventually, fatefully, for a dominant share of seats at the policy board's first meeting in 1998.

The policy board was a crucial victory for the neoconservatives. It brought them from the margins of Washington conversation into its power centers. It allowed them to translate their ideas from lofty abstractions into black-and-white policy proposals. And it was part of their strategy to win power not so much by persuading voters, which can take years or decades, but by a hostile takeover of GOP institutions, nudging out the realists who'd traditionally dominated their party — many of whom were conspicuously absent from the policy board.

Later that year, as Bill Clinton struggled to hold on to the presidency amid the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the neoconservatives used the policy board to convince congressional Republicans to adopt a radical idea they had formed only that year: The United States should topple the Iraqi government.

The neoconservatives' **case for Iraq** was abstract and highly ideological, positing not that Saddam posed a substantial threat to the United States, but rather that removing him would allow democracy and pro-American politics to organically sweep the Middle East. The specifics of their argument hardly mattered; congressional Republicans saw an opportunity to embarrass Clinton on his Iraq policy, which in Washington was widely considered a failure. They passed the Iraq Liberation Act, which declared regime change as official US policy; a reluctant but embattled Clinton signed it.

Two years later, Texas Gov. George W. Bush became president. Moved by neoconservatism's idealistic faith in democracy and perhaps sympathetic to its fixation on Iraq — Saddam Hussein had attempted to **assassinate** Bush's father — Bush appointed neoconservative leaders, many from the policy board, to several top positions.

The once-fringe neoconservative movement, in the space of a few short years, had seized first their party's intellectual power centers, then its legislative agenda, and now the commanding heights of American leadership itself. Against all odds, they had won.

Today, less than two decades after seizing the Republican Party, they are on the verge of losing it. The party's two leading presidential candidates, Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, are promising to break from neoconservatism — and voters seem to be responding.

Neoconservatives are fighting back, but they're losing. Republican elites might still support them, but the voters do not seem to.

On Monday, a number of leading neoconservatives, including some who had participated in the movement's rise to power, signed on to Sen. Marco Rubio's "**National Security Advisory Council.**" That same day, CNN learned that some of Rubio's own staffers were urging him to quit the presidential race before the mid-March primary in his home state, if only to spare him the humiliation of his expected defeat.

Many neoconservatives, perhaps sensing they had no viable candidate to express their views for them, signed an open letter **denouncing** Trump. Others are **threatening** not just to oppose Trump, but to split with the party entirely and support Hillary Clinton.

Neoconservatives can threaten to quit the Republican Party, or warn that the party is diverging from their values, but it looks increasingly like they may have it backward: that it is the Republican Party, as constituted by its voters and their policy preferences, that is rejecting neoconservatives.

That might seem surprising. But when you look at the brief history of neoconservative reign over the Republican Party, it seems inevitable. If anything, it is surprising that it took this long.

What happened? How did this movement go, in only 20 short years, from dissident faction to conquering the party to seizing the White House to collapse and an imminent return to exile? How did neoconservatives lose their hold on the party?

Neoconservatives say that Donald Trump has **left them** without a political party of their own. But was the Republican Party ever really theirs? Or will we one day look back at the GOP's neoconservative era as something of a fluke, in which this highly ideological movement dominated the party for only about 20 years, and led American foreign policy for only four?

The neoconservatives' last war

The thing that unifies Trump's foreign policy heresies in the eyes of the GOP establishment — the common theme of his foreign policy divides with the party — is not the positions that are most outlandish, but rather the positions that most diverge from neoconservatism.

And that hints at something uncomfortable for the party: Its neoconservative foreign policy elites are fighting not just against Trump, but also to hold on to their increasingly fragile dominance of the party itself.

Trump's sins are not just the dangers he would pose to America and the world if elected — though those are real, and earnestly worry neoconservatives — but for what he is exposing: a divide between the party electorate and elite over foreign policy.

It's a divide that, if widened too far, could risk separating neoconservative elites from the party itself. But because elite- and academic-minded neoconservatives seized power by capturing elite institutions — think tanks, policy journals, donors — but not by doing the harder work of attracting voters, this is a divide that may have always been there, just beneath the surface, waiting to be opened by a Donald Trump or Ted Cruz.

In a mid-February debate, for example, Trump united the half-dozen other candidates against him by **declaring** that the Iraq invasion had been a disaster. A week later, he again said something that so outraged the other candidates that they once again all agreed Trump had gone beyond the pale: He declared that he would **remain officially neutral** on Israel-Palestine. Trump also drew objections for **warning** that regime change in Syria would risk exacerbating chaos there.

On the surface, these seem like banal and even mainstream positions, especially compared with Trump's other statements. Official US policy on Israel-Palestine has been neutrality for decades. On Iraq, both foreign policy experts and **voters** largely consider the 2003 invasion a terrible mistake. Pentagon officials themselves often lament wasteful spending. And most Syria analysts agree that removing Assad by force would worsen the violence.

But Trump's statements, reasonable though they might seem to many voters, appalled neoconservative-aligned writers and establishment candidates. And that may have been deliberate: Trump was directly challenging neoconservative orthodoxy, which states that the Iraq War was just and necessary, that intervention and regime change are desirable, and that the US must side unequivocally with Israel.

This put neoconservatives in the position of denouncing Trump for positions that are, in fact, quite mainstream. In those moments, as establishment candidates shouted down Trump for saying things that would be uncontroversial to most people, what you were seeing was the degree to which neoconservatives had estranged their party's foreign policy from the actual preferences of its voters.

This is part of a larger problem that the GOP has had with Trump, and with its own investment in neoconservative orthodoxy. The billionaire businessman has exploited divisions between the Republican electorate and the Republican establishment, advocating for policies that are popular with voters but not with party elites.

This has helped Trump to draw support over other candidates unwilling to break with party orthodoxy, but it's also exposed the degree to which that orthodoxy often follows elite rather than voter preferences. This is true on taxes, on trade deals, and, perhaps we are now learning, on foreign policy.

New York magazine's **Jonathan Chait suggests** this may be, in part, driving the GOP establishment's opposition to Trump: a belief, possibly correct, that party elites will lose their ability to impose policy positions that are unpopular with their voters.

"The fear inspired by Trump is not merely that he would blow the party's chances of winning the presidency (though he probably would), or even that he would saddle it with long-term damage among the growing Latino bloc (though he would do that as well)," Chait writes. "It is that Trump would release the conservative movement's policy hammerlock on the Republican Party."

That "hammerlock" on foreign policy seems particularly under threat. Tellingly, it is neoconservatives who have been among the most vocal in opposing Trump. It was neoconservatives who **fired the first shots** in the GOP establishment's war on Trump's foreign policy, and largely neoconservatives who have declared they will cross party lines to oppose him.

This may arise, in part, from the nature of neoconservatism itself, whose rigid commitment to ideology has always left it ill-prepared for the challenges and compromises of running a political party.

The neoconservative takeover of the GOP: spectacular, improbable, and brief

The word "neoconservative" is often taken as synonymous with Republican Party foreign policy, or as merely a fancy way of saying "hawkish." But in fact neoconservatism is far more intricate — and its hold on GOP elite policy is quite new.

Neoconservatism first arose during the Cold War, in part among liberals who sought more hard-line policies. It combined a desire for American global dominance, imposed by force, with an almost messianic belief that this dominance would naturally sow freedom and democracy. It was thus America's right and responsibility to topple adversaries and replace them with American-style free market democracies.

As prominent member Max Boot **put it in 2002**, on the eve of the Iraq invasion, "Neoconservatives believe in using American might to promote American ideals abroad."

But neoconservatism long languished as a movement of conservative intelligentsia, one popular in certain conservative policy journals and on university campuses but with little power.

When Ronald Reagan came into office in 1980, it looked like he might usher in a neoconservative era, but he marginalized the movement on its most cherished belief: that the US should be maximally hostile toward, and unceasingly seek the destruction of, the Soviet Union. Rather, Reagan sought compromise and conciliation with the Soviets, **outraging neoconservatives**. His successor, George H.W. Bush, was even more skeptical of neoconservative ideas, adhering rather to the hard-nosed realism that had long dominated the party.

Neoconservatism's **best years were in exile**. During the second term of the Clinton administration, its thought leaders fought something of an ideological civil war with the GOP's realists. With the Soviet Union gone, they **focused** on another adversary whose destruction, they promised, would bring freedom and prosperity: Iraq.

The neoconservatives gradually won over conservative intelligentsia, then GOP policy elites, and eventually congressional Republicans, culminating in the Congressional Policy Board and the Iraq Liberation Act, both in 1998.

In 2000, both leading candidates in the GOP presidential primary, George W. Bush and John McCain — one a relative neophyte and the other something of a party outsider — were drawn to the newly popular neoconservative worldview. The movement, only a few short years after waging a civil war in the GOP, had suddenly become the party's standard-bearer.

When neoconservatives followed Bush into positions of power in 2001, they were ready to finally implement their worldview. Two years and two months later — owing in part to the 9/11 attacks, though their connection to the Iraq War is **more complex** than is widely understood — they had achieved their dream of invading and occupying Iraq.

The humiliations in Iraq

Their dream became a nightmare. Thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of Iraqis died in a war that brought not peace and democracy, as promised, but chaos and disaster. The war that was to have proven neoconservatism's revolutionary power instead exposed what turned out to be serious flaws in both its understanding of the world and its proscribed policies.

But, tellingly, the public debate over Iraq, both before and after the invasion, did not turn on **the neoconservative ideology, ideas, and policy aims** that had helped lead the US to war. Rather, it focused on the important but much narrower question of whether Iraq, as Bush had claimed, possessed a clandestine weapons of mass destruction program.

The Bush administration's public case for war, after all, had focused overwhelmingly on WMDs. In hindsight, it appears the administration believed these claims, but that its primary motivation had in fact been the lofty goals of regime change and democracy promotion. That would have been a more difficult case to make, based as it was on neoconservative ideas rarely expressed in

anything simpler than a chapter-length *Foreign Affairs* essay. So the administration never fully made it.

This spoke to the problem that would, years later, ultimately become neoconservatism's political undoing: It had persuaded the Republican Party elites and captured elite institutions, but never made a serious effort to persuade voters. A popular constituency for neoconservatism never formed. It was perhaps always inevitable, then, that voters and elites would drift apart on foreign policy until, as may be happening now, they would split entirely.

But long before that happened, neoconservatives suffered even among the party elite. As Iraq burned, Bush himself, once the champion of the neoconservative cause, turned away from it. Between his narrow 2004 reelection and his humbling 2006 midterm losses, he **sidelined** many of the neoconservatives in his administration and quietly abandoned neoconservative policies.

Voters turned against neoconservatism as well — or at least against its signature policy, the Iraq War. In 2004, 2006, and 2008, Democrats ran heavily on opposition to the war, each time winning greater victories.

As the economy collapsed, even the Republican electorate became war-weary and inward-looking. But neoconservatives, ever wedded to their principles, lobbied for maintaining US troops in Iraq and for ramping up hostilities with their new chosen adversary: Iran.

Neoconservatives had risen to prominence in the late 1990s by calling for regime change in Iraq, so when they achieved this, they became so closely associated with the war's catastrophic collapse that it may have doomed them. By 2006, it was already clear that the neoconservatives were declining even in their own White House.

In the decade since, that trend has only continued, with neoconservatives steadily losing the power and influence they enjoyed for a few brief years in the early 2000s. They retained enough elite positions — in think tanks and other policy centers, as well as with donors — to exercise real power within the party, which is seen in their ongoing war with Donald Trump. But their hold on power had begun to slip.

Looking back, the surprise isn't that neoconservatives are losing control of the GOP. It's that it took so long for it to happen.

Neoconservatism's weakening hold on the Republican Party

Neoconservatism never really recovered from the setbacks of the mid-2000s, when voters and even Bush himself rejected their ideas. But despite these losses, neoconservatives who supported the invasion remain prominent in the movement and in the party itself. Perhaps as a result, its chief thinkers have never reevaluated the ideas that led them to 2003.

Neoconservatism never underwent a full reckoning for Iraq, because it didn't have to. The Bush administration could sideline neoconservatives, but it could never admit the invasion itself had been a mistake. This forced the party to defend the war and its underlying ideology in the 2004 and 2006 elections.

The 2008 presidential election was the party's opportunity to wipe the slate clean and distance itself from the war and ideology that had proven so unpopular with voters. Antiwar sentiment was at an **all-time high**. Instead, the party's nomination went to a movement neoconservative, John McCain; the runners-up were fellow neoconservative Mitt Romney and neoconservatism-inclined evangelical Mike Huckabee.

What had happened? For the preceding eight years, the Bush administration had enforced total party discipline on the Iraq War. The party's only antiwar figure, Ron Paul, was **seen as a crank and a racist**.

Meanwhile, neoconservatives ejected from the Bush White House had found comfortable perches in GOP establishment think tanks and publications — the first outposts their movement had seized in their 1990s rise. They remained in a powerful position to shape GOP orthodoxy and steer party elites.

Also during the first years of the Obama era, many neoconservatives became regular fixtures in conservative media such as Fox News, which appreciated their highly ideological critiques of Obama's foreign policy — much as they had been drawn to neoconservative critiques of Bill Clinton in the 1990s.

Despite their setbacks, they proved their sway within the party in 2008 and again in 2012, when, improbably, they helped elevate GOP presidential primary candidates who promised adherence to neoconservative doctrine — even as the rise of the Tea Party signaled a Republican electorate that was more inward-looking.

But their ideas failed to find electoral support. McCain, in 2008, struggled to argue for extending an Iraq War the public overwhelmingly wanted to end. Romney, in 2012, articulated an Afghanistan War policy that sounded hawkish but was functionally identical to Obama's (both implicitly recognized the war as a failure and lost cause).

Neoconservatives failed to overturn Obama's nuclear deal with Iran, and they have struggled to provide a cogent answer to Libya, where an intervention based in part on their ideals was followed by chaos.

But throughout all this, neoconservatives maintained their hold over party orthodoxy. This allowed them to avoid addressing the painful lessons of Iraq, which might otherwise have led them to reevaluate their ideological conclusions, their political strategies for turning those views into policy, or both — either of which might have allowed them to adapt.

This is not to suggest that any such reckoning would necessarily have ended with the Republican Party outright rejecting neoconservatism. But it would have at least brought the party to revisit, and perhaps temper, the totality of its ideological commitment.

The party might have returned, even if only in part, to its oft-celebrated legacy of foreign policy realism, most recently embodied by George H.W. Bush. It might even have embraced its libertarian strain. But the reckoning never came. Party elites and voters alike were denied a painful but necessary conversation over neoconservatism's place as unquestioned party orthodoxy.

Until someone came along and forced that conversation: Donald Trump.

Are neoconservatives leaving the party, or is the party leaving neoconservatives?

Like so much of what Trump says, his claim to have opposed the Iraq War from the start turns out to be **a lie**. But this is hardly the point. Trump has positioned himself as challenging Republican Party orthodoxy, and, for months, one of the orthodoxies he has most loudly and single-mindedly challenged is the wisdom of invading Iraq.

"George W. Bush made a mistake," Trump said in a February debate, as one of many examples. "We can make mistakes. But that one was a beauty. We should have never been in Iraq. We have destabilized the Middle East."

This is different from Trump's other heresies in two ways. First, unlike his base-appeasing rhetoric on torture or immigration, this is a position that makes Trump *more* rather than *less* viable in a general election. In **a 2014 poll**, for example, 71 percent of Americans said the Iraq War wasn't worth it, including about half of Republicans.

In theory, then, Republican elites supposedly concerned with electability should welcome Trump's position; he has found an issue that can clearly appeal to GOP primary voters as well as nationally — as well as being an issue on which Trump could challenge Hillary Clinton, who voted for the war.

But that brings us to the second way Trump's position here is different from his usual heresies: Unlike his plan to build a giant border wall or to bar Muslim foreigners, his view on Iraq is heretical not because it violates the basic norms of human decency but rather because it breaks with party orthodoxy.

And therein lies Trump's real threat on foreign policy: He is demonstrating that it would be within the Republican Party's political interests to jettison the neoconservatives.

He has proven that there is a real constituency for opposing neoconservatism among Republicans; that an anti-neoconservative foreign policy — even one as incoherent and nonsensical as his own — can succeed with GOP voters, and would have a far better chance in a national election.

He is showing, in other words, that the Republican Party has already left the neoconservatives behind, whether party elites recognize this or not.

It's not just on Iraq. Trump has **opposed** neoconservative-led calls to depose Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. He also expressed skepticism of the need for the US to maintain a global system of military alliances — not an exclusively neoconservative belief, but one they emphasize. He has refused to "tear up" the Iran nuclear deal. And he has repeatedly stated his willingness to work with foreign adversaries such as Russian President Vladimir Putin.

All of these positions are not just un-neoconservative but *anti*, the precise and complete opposite of their policy prescriptions and worldview, which call for aggressive use of military force, disdain diplomacy, and encourage maximal hostility toward any adversaries, particularly those

who challenge American hegemony. It is difficult to narrow down Trump's popularity to any one issue, but there is no sign that he has suffered for this foreign policy.

And it's not just Trump: Ben Carson, now forgotten but once ranked second in the polls, has criticized the Iraq War and repeatedly stated his **opposition** to military interventions and regime change.

More importantly, Ted Cruz, who is currently ranked second and has earned a respectable portion of delegates, has positioned himself as explicitly challenging neoconservatism.

"If you look at President Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton and for that matter some of the more aggressive Washington neocons, they have consistently misperceived the threat of radical Islamic terrorism and have advocated military adventurism that has had the effect of benefiting radical Islamic terrorists," **Cruz said in a November interview.**

In a later speech to the Heritage Foundation, **Cruz warned**, "We will not win by replacing dictators, as unpleasant as they may be, with terrorists who want to kill us."

At a subsequent GOP debate, Cruz sparred with the other candidates by challenging neoconservative-aligned ideals and policy positions, such as the Iraq War and their general opposition to dictators.

The other candidates lined up to denounce Cruz's betrayal of these ideals, and **subsequently** so did neoconservative policy elites. But rather than sinking Cruz, his poll numbers only rose, and today he is the only candidate whose challenge to Trump appears even remotely viable.

Neoconservative party elites are now announcing they will vote against Trump if he wins the primary, and that they **may even leave or seek to divide the party itself**. But it appears possible it is the party that is leaving them.

Trump, along with Cruz and Carson, has shown that a Republican primary can win despite — or perhaps even by virtue of — opposing the neoconservative beliefs that are supposedly central to Republican Party foreign policy.

And that may help explain the mystery of how neoconservatism dominated the party for so long after its mid-2000s defeats: GOP voters only appeared to support it because the party denied them an alternative. When Trump came along to test that support, he revealed that it did not, in fact, exist. The party had left neoconservatives behind.

A GOP-neoconservative breakup was probably always coming

The movement's greatest strength and weakness, in its ability to turn its views into policy, has always been its uncompromising ideological commitment.

This helped neoconservatives offer an appealing critique of the Clinton administration, and of realists in the GOP, as insufficiently dedicated to American ideals. And it made the neoconservatives well-positioned to address Americans' existential anxieties after 9/11, because they seemed to have big answers that spoke to big questions.

But that ideological commitment also made the neoconservatives unbending — even when their positions might be unpopular nationally, or even within their own party.

This meant advocating, in 2008, for remaining in Iraq when most Americans did not want to, and later for the same in Afghanistan. It has meant advocating policies of increasing rather than decreasing hostility toward Iran and Syria — both nations that Americans distrust, but against which they are **skeptical** of conducting large-scale military operations.

And it has meant urging greater involvement in the chaos of the Arab Spring, and turning **against** secular Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who is **popular** among many conservatives for his opposition to Islamists.

When their policies have met opposition from Republican lawmakers or voters, neoconservatives have often defaulted to the position they, as ideological purists, find more comfortable: principled opposition.

Robert Kagan, for example, a prominent historian and columnist who helped lead neoconservatism's rise in the 1990s and early 2000s, has spent much of the past few years **criticizing the GOP**.

Neoconservative threats to support Hillary Clinton against their own party's nominee are not idle — and not specific to Trump. A number of neoconservatives **threatened** the same when libertarian Rand Paul looked like a contender for the 2016 GOP nomination.

When you speak to neoconservatives, they will often point out that their movement originally began with Democrats, that it remains not an explicitly Republican ideology. And neoconservatives have long delighted in siding with Democrats on what they see as issues of high principle.

William Kristol, the editor of the Weekly Standard and an architect of modern neoconservatism, **told the New York Times in 2004**, of his magazine's decision to side with John Kerry against George W. Bush over an Iraq dispute, "If you read the last few issues of The Weekly Standard, it has as much or more in common with the liberal hawks than with traditional conservatives."

"The neocons would occasionally show their hand, admitting that they would choose foreign policy orthodoxy over party, and threatening to return to their Democratic Party roots," Christopher Preble, of the libertarian Cato Institute, **wrote recently**.

It isn't that neoconservatives are disloyal; quite the opposite, as they would tell you that they put loyalty to their principles first. But that kind of inflexible loyalty to ideas is a luxury that doesn't comport well with running a major political party, which must function as a coalition of disparate groups with disparate beliefs and has to make difficult trade-offs to effectively govern.

Critics of neoconservatism might argue that this preoccupation with ideological purity has also contributed to its policy failings — that in the runup to invading Iraq, neoconservatives were more focused on high-minded arguments about democracy promotion and the nature of Arab autocracy than they were on the nitty-gritty of Iraqi sectarian politics or post-conflict

reconstruction; that after Iraq collapsed, neoconservatives remained too committed to their ideals to ask whether some of those ideals had led them astray.

And so, faced with the difficulty of instilling those ideals in a Republican electorate that appears deeply reluctant to embrace them, it's hardly surprising that many neoconservatives would consider abandoning that party — and thus their power over it — before they would steer GOP foreign policy institutions to more accurately reflect voter preferences.

Trump, odious though he may be, appears to have done what GOP foreign policy elites refused to do for so long: give Republican voters the foreign policy they want. And in the absence of Trump, there is Cruz, just as before there was Carson, and after them all there will be another candidate who sees that economic nationalism, not neoconservatism, offers a path to victory.

The story, then, is not one in which the Republican Party has been overtaken by a man who betrays the party's foreign policy ideals; rather, it is a story in which we have learned, suddenly and perhaps belatedly, that it is the Trumps and Cruzes and Carsons, not the party establishment, who represent where the party is truly located on foreign policy.

Republican foreign policy leaders might believe they are opposing Trump to preserve the party, but in fact, whether they realize it or not, they are opposing the party in order to preserve neoconservatism. They are not rejecting Trump but rather the GOP itself — the party with which they were never really synonymous, which they held only briefly, and which for four years in the early 2000s gave them far greater power than they ever enjoyed before or since.

The neoconservatives were always more comfortable in opposition, and it may be the opposition, including within their own party, to which they are returning.