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THE NEOCONSERVATIVES

Among those anticipating, promoting, participating in and benefiting from the past few years' shift to the right in the national mood is a group of social observers and essayists who are coming to be called "neoconservatives." For the past half decade and more they have dedicated themselves—often with considerable sense of mission, one might add—to elaborating the intellectual rationale behind public policies that would turn away from social activism, government intervention, and grand schemes to reform America—and rely instead on the private sector, the market mechanisms, and traditional institutions such as the family and local community. The group encompasses many of America's best known and most often quoted members of the intellectual elite including Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Robert Nisbet, Daniel P. Moynihan, and James Q. Wilson, as well as less often cited Samuel P. Huntington, Edward C. Banfield, and Ernest van den Haag.

Despite significant differences of tone, style, and temperament neoconservatives qualify as a school because they all share the same basic views of society and human nature. Because neoconservatives are often in print and on the air, their basic position is well known: freedom and equality, far from being compatible values, are seen as frequently in conflict with each other. The main reason is that freedom to neoconservatives means noninterference by government with exercise of individual and group preferences and "natural" social patterns and tendencies. Equality, however, inasmuch as it fails to evolve naturally, tends to require a government to promote it; ergo, efforts to promote equality threaten freedom. More generally, neoconservatives are concerned about the oppressive encroachment of government bureaucracies on the spontaneous capabilities of individuals, families, communities, and voluntary associations—be it for purposes of consumerism, environmental or worker protection, or whatnot.

Also, neoconservatives see inequality, at least certain forms of inequality, as a positive social feature. They tend to see a society of

more pragmatic—and have a wider appeal, although their basic position is quite similar.

A typical unabashed, true-blue neoconservative is Samuel P. Huntington, who has never been bashful about baring the undemocratic premises that underlie his neoconservatism. In 1957 he closed his book, *The Soldier and the State*, by portraying West Point as the closest contemporary embodiment of the inegalitarian ideal. In a passage that comes about as close to poetry as any that claims to be political science, he writes of the military academy:

There is ordered serenity. The parts do not exist on their own, but accept their subordination to the whole. Beauty and utility are merged in gray stone. Neat lawns surround compact, trim homes, each identified by the name and rank of its occupant. The buildings stand in fixed relation to each other, part of an over-all plan, their character and station symbolizing their contributions, stone and brick for the senior officers, wood for the lower ranks. The post is suffused with the rhythm and harmony which comes when collective will supplants individual whim. West Point is a community of structured purpose, one in which the behavior of men is governed by a code, the product of generations. There is little room for presumption and individualism. The unity of the community incites no man to be more than he is. In order is found peace; in discipline, fulfillment; in community, security.

His final stanzas counsel not only admiration but emulation, even if it goes against the American grain:

West Point is a gray island in a many colored sea, a bit of Sparta in the might of Babylon. Yet is it possible to deny that the military values—loyalty, duty, restraint, dedication—are the ones America most needs today? That the disciplined order of West Point has more to offer than the garish individualism of Main Street?

In his bicentennial contribution to *The Public Interest* entitled "The Democratic Distemper," Huntington diagnosed America's socio-political ailments as stemming from "an excess of democracy," adding, "Al Smith once remarked, 'The only cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy.' Our analysis suggests that applying that cure at the present time could well be adding fuel to the fire."

Huntington is quite aware that such baldfaced conservatism could hardly lead to mass acclaim. In a letter to *The New York Times* he explains, "... if I wished to 'forge a new base of power,' I could find much more productive ways to do it than to espouse a conservatism

recent work concerning Affirmative Action, *Affirmative Discrimination*, he does not attack outright the value of equality, nor, directly, even Affirmative Action. He favors "equal opportunity," a time-honored formula which fails to deal with the question of how to equalize opportunities for people who begin from largely different starting points, precisely where discrimination-in-reverse—at the core of Affirmative Action—enters. As for Affirmative Action, Glazer asks that it be "re-examined," because, he holds, it is not necessary for middle-class blacks (they make it, he says, without it) and does not work for lower-class blacks (among whom unemployment is rampant).

Similarly, it is instructive to compare pragmatic and popular James Q. Wilson's views on the proper societal approach to crime and punishment with those of ideological and controversial Ernest van den Haag. (Each has a recent book: respectively, *Thinking About Crime* and *Punishing Criminals*.) Van den Haag's position is that improving the conditions of the disadvantaged is no solution to the crime problem; indeed, it is more likely to promote than to deter crime by fueling the expectations, envy, and frustration of the poor. Wilson, in contrast, does not deny that poverty helps spawn crime and that overcoming poverty is therefore a useful way of combating it. Rather he argues that poverty alone does not account for enough of the "variance": the majority of poor people are not criminals. Hence, to focus on overcoming poverty as a means of reducing crime is to invest our resources and energies disproportionately to this factor's causative weight. Moreover, explains Wilson, those who insist on combating the "root causes" of crime—by which they often mean poverty, alienation and associated family break-up—are also concentrating on the least tractable of crime's causes. However meritorious such strategies of societal reform and rehabilitation may be in theory, more is to be gained pragmatically by tailoring our corrective efforts to the immediate causes of crime which lie in individual motivation. Thus, by a different route, Wilson arrives at much the same concrete proposals for public policy changes as Van den Haag: i.e., concentrate on punishment and deterrence, making it clear that "crime does not pay" via such measures as mandatory jail sentences, restrictions on judicial discretion, and limits on plea bargaining.

Perhaps the most popular pragmatic neoconservative is Daniel Bell, who is most reluctant to accept the label, calling himself a "right-wing social democrat." Unlike other neoconservatives, Bell does not argue explicitly that the division of wealth and power in America is fundamentally a "reward system." In other words, "have-nots" are

approximated, the market offers individuals as many (or as few) votes as they have dollars. Moreover, an odd discount mechanism works by which the richer you are, the more you get per dollar; for instance, a small saver will get lower interest on his savings than a big saver and will pay a higher interest on loans he takes. Though one can argue that both politics and market relations are bound to reflect overall the existing structure of power and privileges—inequities politics modifies, the market magnifies.

Kristol and Bell argue that you can use the market to introduce the social changes you desire, but this ignores the need to deal with the powerful people who oppose such changes, whose opposition can scarcely be countered without political mobilization of those who favor change. Societal stability is a classic conservative value. It was always a conservative line to call upon the underprivileged to sit still so as not to upset national unity, law and order. These arguments gloss over the possibility that a class of people may find their needs better served in a different societal structure (hence one cannot assume that they will be scared off by fear of overly disturbing this one). Studies by William Gamson and others show that the fear of instability and violence is one of the main reasons those in power eventually come around to make concessions to the have-nots. As for the argument that if the underprivileged voice their needs or demand their entitlements, the society will erupt in a war of all-against-all, the result of unreasonable, fanatic, intransigent minorities, the brief history of the turbulent sixties suggests quite the opposite: given rather limited concessions to minorities (and youth) violence (never all that high on a historically comparative scale) subsided and they returned to working within the system—rather than to overthrowing it.

Thus, after decades of relative neglect of the conservative position, we now have an articulate new group of advocates. They come in two wrappings, or more precisely, one quite unwrapped and one carefully packaged. Each to his own taste.

equals as unwieldy and as unworkable as an army composed only of foot soldiers. Society may not require "a ruling class" but it can no more do without its various elites—cultural, political, economic, social—than followers can do without leaders. And, as long as inequality is based on talent and achievement, it is, according to neoconservatives, not only necessary but also quite fair.

As concerns human nature, neoconservatives are on the pessimistic side: human beings are not born "good," then mucked up by society's injustices (though still capable of being set right again via deliberate efforts ranging from social reform to individual psychotherapy). Quite the opposite: society is a continual struggle to impose qualities such as order and self-restraint on individuals whose inner drives press them toward disorder, insatiability, and selfishness. Thus neoconservatives are highly skeptical of educational, therapeutic, and rehabilitative efforts to tame and harness these drives. The best that can be expected is that authority may serve to keep a lid on man's psychic cauldron. Writes James Q. Wilson in *Time*:

... from the vantage point of 200 years we should have only modest expectations for what our institutions, facing these problems, can accomplish. We will not eliminate the causes of crime, nor will we rehabilitate offenders in any large numbers. But if prisons cannot rehabilitate, at least they can punish and isolate.

The sense that one is quite familiar with these positions quickly gives way when one ponders the political dilemma of neoconservatives: how is an ideology which openly embraces elites rather than masses, achievements rather than entitlements, "lids" rather than what comes naturally, to be sold to the masses? To put it differently, approximately 30 per cent of Americans see themselves as conservatives; they need not be sold; they already subscribe to these views, although they may enjoy seeing them elaborated—the way people who have already bought Chryslers read chiefly Chrysler ads. But how is one to get to those attracted to the other brands—the nearly 42 percent who see themselves as middle-of-the-roaders, and 29 percent who consider themselves liberals?

Some neoconservatives largely ignore this "marketability" issue; they are unabashedly ideological, adamant, hard-hitting, and let the chips fall where they may. Their appeal is typically sectarian, and they pay the price—they are *not* the mass media's neoconservative heroes. Other neoconservatives concern themselves much more with the values and views of nonneoconservatives and are in this sense less dogmatic,

which has always been a minority stand in the American political tradition."

Another whose neoconservatism is unadulterated and too strong a brew for mass consumption is Edward C. Banfield. His *Unheavenly City* frankly espouses the view that urban poverty is much less the result of general economic and social conditions such as unemployment, exploitation, and the legacies of racism and discrimination than of characterological defects in the poor themselves. Poverty persists because society insulates such individuals from the negative consequences of their improper attitudes and actions—thereby, in effect, encouraging them. Writes Banfield:

This principle implies that the individual should be allowed to suffer penalties (loss of the reward at the very least) if he does not behave as he should. Herbert Spencer was prepared to follow this principle to its logical conclusion, allowing those who failed to provide for the future to starve in their old age in order that others might see from their examples the advantage of saving. Few people today, however, would consider the issue settled by the principle that a cruel deterrent may in the long run be less cruel than the consequences of not deterring. Indeed, few people recognize that there sometimes is a problem of choice between these alternatives. The almost universal opinion today is that, both for his own sake and that of his society, an individual must not be left to suffer the consequences of his actions. If, for example, he has chosen a life of improvidence, he cannot for that reason be allowed to remain below the poverty line. To give him money, however, is to give him an incentive to persist in his ways. . . .

The more bashful neoconservative basic message may be the same, but it is often espoused not as a matter of principle but of pragmatism. As a corollary, they typically write tentatively, as if pulled reluctantly toward conclusions by the overwhelming weight of logic and evidence. While ideological conservatives are more inclined to dispute the desirability of reform goals, pragmatic neoconservatives are more likely to claim that they favor these goals in theory but are forced to point out that attaining them is not feasible or exacts too high a price on resources or other values. In the same vein, pragmatic neoconservatives are more apt to criticize reform activists' means rather than their values, arguing that particular means are to be preferred as less costly or disruptive to other values—without explicitly noting that the means they favor happen to reflect neoconservative values.

Typical of these pragmatists is Nathan Glazer. His writing is careful and scholarly and his observations judicious. Thus, in his most

those who have not worked as hard or as long or have not demonstrated the requisite talent or accomplishment. The "have-nots" are entitled to a share, Bell says. The problem is that they refuse to be content. In their hunger for an even bigger bite of the societal apple, they have let their appetites grow to an extent that no apple can satisfy. Demands have become entitlements, a sense that each group has a right to a growing income, wealth, health, and all else that is to be had. Being "fanatic," the groups are unwilling to negotiate down their fantasies and they refuse to compromise, thus threatening the stability and ultimately the existence of the American society in their frenzy.

Voicing a related fear, Aaron Wildavsky warns in a *Commentary* article of "... the manufacture of incompatible policy demands that impose burdens on government which no government can meet." Again Wildavsky does not say that the various groups—the poor, the blacks, all the other minorities—have no right to what they agitate government for. Rather, he says, if they all try to cash in their moral chips at once—to collect on what they feel society owes them for past and present injustices—they will find not only not enough money in the bank, but no more bank.

Kristol writes, "neo-conservatism is not *at all* [italics mine] hostile to the idea of a welfare state, but it is critical of the Great Society version of this welfare state. . . . It is skeptical of those social programs that create vast and energetic bureaucracies to 'solve social problems.' . . . it is opposed to the paternalistic state." While Kristol cites Social Security and unemployment insurance as acceptable examples of the welfare state, his fondness is for the market mechanisms which, he says, have the right "to respond efficiently to economic realities while preserving the maximum degree of individual freedom."

Bell similarly came to embrace the market as the way to bring into balance the explosion of social wants. "In many public-policy discussions, it is assumed that our choices are either administrative regulation to achieve those ends—or abandoning the ends. But the market can often be used to achieve them efficiently. The market provides for self-adjustment and self-regulation within a framework of rules."

One reads these and similar lines of the Harvard expert, unable to believe that he can really be either so naive or so disingenuous. Even a sophomore, and not necessarily in sociology, knows that the market, far from maximizing the freedoms of the individual, maximizes the range of choice only of those with a high buying power while restricting that of persons with low buying power. Unlike the polity in which the notion of one individual, one vote is at least very crudely