

# THE OTHER 1960S: RE-ASSESSING THE ENDURING INFLUENCE OF NEOCONSERVATISM IN THE UNITED STATES.<sup>1</sup>

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## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The 1960s bequeathed to incoming generations of Americans a world in which neoconservatism became the intellectual spearhead of rightwing political thought and action. To this day, politics and policy making retain a potent neoconservative flair, which must be added to the considerable vigor of neoconservative principles in the enduring cultural wars still coloring American public life. This article reassesses the origins of neoconservatism and examines the key elements and subsequent influence of this group of American rightwing thinkers and policy makers.

## **RESUMEN**

La década de los años 1960 ha legado a las subsiguientes generaciones de estadounidenses un mundo en el que el neoconservadurismo se ha convertido en la punta de lanza intelectual del pensamiento y la acción política de la derecha norteamericana. Desde entonces hasta la actualidad, tanto la política como las iniciativas de gestión pública en la Gran República han retenido una potente connotación neoconservadora que debe añadirse, además, al considerable vigor de los principios

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neoconservadores en las duraderas guerras culturales que aún se libran en la vida pública estadounidense. Este artículo re-evalúa los orígenes del neoconservadurismo y examina los elementos clave del mismo, así como la influencia subsecuente de este grupo de pensadores y gestores públicos asociados a la derecha política.

Fifty years ago New York construction workers violently burst into the city's streets in support of Richard Nixon's Vietnam policy and, crucially, to battle against activists of the anti-war movement while shouting "USA all the way" and recommending their youthful opponents to either "love it or leave it" (Perlstein, 493-495). The event is relevant because it both eerily echoes the language employed half a century later by President Trump when he suggested that four congresswomen whom he judged insufficiently patriotic –and who happened to be of non-white descent– should also leave the country. Moreover, those events also help to underline the frequently overlooked populist aspects of the rightwing reaction against the set of countercultural values commonly associated with the 1960s (Hijiya 201-227). The objective of this article is, precisely, to contribute towards the growing body of literature acknowledging that the 1960s were marked by the growth and development of American conservatism as much as by the better known developments on the left of the political spectrum and, therefore, towards a reassessment of the 1960s as a whole and of the decade's subsequent effects upon the culture and politics of present-day United States.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the most lasting effect of the 1960s upon the American right was the emergence of two new members in the conservative family: the populist New Right and the neoconservatives. The continuities between the former and the populist revival evident in the politics

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<sup>2</sup> There is a significant and coherent body of literature examining the rise of the early conservative movement. See Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America*. Houghton Mifflin, 1996; Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power*. Times Books, 1986; José María Marco, *La Nueva Revolución Americana*. Ciudadela, 2007; John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*. Penguin, 2004; Jerome L. Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism*. University of California Press, 1990. The existing literature has also been enriched by "in-house" conservative accounts, such as Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America*. Free Press, 1999; William Rusher, *The Rise of the Right*. William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985.

and presidency of Donald Trump through the emergence of the Tea Party are evident and demand a full examination in their own right – most notably rightwing populism’s incarnation in George Wallace, the Alabama governor who ran an independent presidential campaign under the rather tantalizing slogan, with post-2016 hindsight, “Stand Up for America” (see for instance Carter, 324-70; Berlet and Lyons 228-247; Kazin; Rosenthal and Trost 305-323; Kranish and Fisher 309-349). These pages, however, aim at evaluating the 60’s as the opening of a new epoch for the American right through an analysis of the origins of neoconservatism, which is less obviously connected with but equally crucial to current cultural and political developments.

This analysis is not only timely because we are now witnessing a resurgence of rightwing political energy in the United States, but also because of the notable confusion that surrounds the character of the neoconservative brand of American conservatism despite the presence of some early and rather informative scholarly work (Ehrman; Steinfeld; Heillbrunn). In a process that intensified in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the term “neoconservative” has acquired a peculiar meaning in the public mind after it has been used, often as a term of abuse, to define one given way of conducting foreign policy which journalists and opinion makers, as well as otherwise quite sound scholarly work (see for instance Diamond 178-204; Blumenthal ix-xix), have tended to associate with a sort of dark, rightwing clique headed by President George W. Bush. In alternative readings, even the former president was the feckless hostage of this, now emphatically dark and decidedly corrupt, faction of the right led by Dick Cheney, as suggested in Michael Moore’s 2004 documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Adam McKay’s 2018 film *Vice* and, implicitly but not very subtly, in Jonathan Demme’s remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*, released, not coincidentally, almost simultaneously with Michael Moore’s blast at the Bush Administration and amidst the rising tension caused by the then spiraling out of control occupation of Iraq. A cabal, in any case, both corrupt in its willingness to put the federal institutions at the service of private interests and malignant in its determination to deal with the international affairs of the Republic through invading, or at the very least bombing, the adversary (Halper and Clarke, specially 13-16, 273-295).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the latest and quite illustrative iteration of this brand of rather superficial analysis has focused on

the figures of John Bolton, Donald Trump's admittedly hawkish National Security Advisor between April 2018 and September 2019, and Special Envoy to Venezuela Elliot Abrams. Little surprise also when, given the atmosphere surrounding neoconservatism, one finds a panic-stricken op-ed piece in *USA Today* by former army captain Michael Morford warning that "the neocons are back" and graphically entitled "John Bolton is Trying to Steer Us Into Another Mideast War" or when one finds, in the pages of the *Washington Post*, a barely more sober piece by college professor Brian D'Haeseleer graphically entitled "How the Neocons Captured Donald Trump." Even before the above appointments had been announced and at a time when *The Weekly Standard*, the then main publication of neoconservative opinion, had closed down after strenuous and consistent neoconservative opposition to the candidacy of Donald Trump throughout the 2016 electoral season, *Rolling Stone*, not exactly supporters of Trump's presidency either, managed to connect the dastardly neocons with the Trump White House in Matt Taibbi's "Return of the Neocons!" (exclamation mark in the original). More revealingly, the on-line magazine *Politico* received the appointment of Abrams with the headline "Elliot Abrams, prominent DC Neocon Special Envoy to Venezuela." Tellingly enough *Politico*, yet again not suspicious of Trumpite affinities, chose to underline the appointee's bone fide status as both a Washington insider and as a neoconservative rather than, say, Abram's guilt during the Iran-Contra scandal, and therefore prioritized giving the lie to Donald Trump's oft repeated platitudes against the elite politicians supposedly festering in "the swamp" within the Beltway. Quite correctly so, however, for neoconservatism as a political movement within the American right has consciously sought to operate at the level of political and intellectual elites, while consistently disdaining the creation of a mass following (Dorrien 8-17); to say nothing of the obvious inconsistency between the aggressive, interventionist leanings of both Bolton and some (but not all, see for instance Kirkpatrick 303-305) neocons, and the isolationist instincts—one has to hesitate to speak of "convictions," never mind "ideas"—of President Trump as in, for instance, his consistent pre-presidential criticism of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Trump, "How I'd Run the Country (Better)") and his abundantly expressed impatience with the continued presence of US troops in both the latter theatre and the Middle East, including the serious, albeit apparently shambolic

attempt at unilateral withdrawal from Syria (Wright, “Syria a Withdrawal or a Surrender?”).

Yet, the popular perception bears scant relation to neoconservatives as both a historically relevant and politically influential group within the American conservative family and contains seriously problematic assumptions about their relationship with the brand of rightwing politics and ideas to which Donald Trump has attached himself. As the following pages show, the connection between Donald Trump’s brand of rightwing proposals and the neoconservatives’ is real and significant, albeit indirect and belonging to the realm of ideas rather than to specific individuals or articulated through concrete organizational links. Crucially, it does not lie in foreign policy, but in certain conservative populist premises which have their main impact on domestic affairs and from which attitudes about foreign affairs –some them indeed shared by both neoconservatives and otherwise isolationist rightwing populists in Trump’s fashion– ultimately derive.

This essay re-examines the political science and journalistic literature as well as the works of neoconservatives themselves to show how the first wave of neoconservative thinkers and opinion makers emerged as a political reality during the mid-1960s around two particular journals –*The Public Interest* and *Commentary* which, crucially, acted in reaction to the perceived ravages of the counterculture against previously accepted cultural axioms. It cannot be emphasized enough that the center of gravity of that early neoconservative message was thoroughly uninterested in foreign affairs and was located within a particular analysis of domestic issues that emphasized the cultural welfare of the nation. Equally important, the ideological foundations of neoconservatism were not necessarily located in and certainly did not originate within the spectrum of the political right. This is relevant because neoconservatives took considerable pride in their capacity to attack the 1960’s New Left *from within* and therefore, again, offering a hint of the apparent contradictions of ongoing political and cultural debates in the United States.

## **NECONSERVATISM AND THE INHERITANCE OF THE 1960S**

Broadly speaking, this decade-long period of turbulent change spanned from the passing of the 1963 Civil Rights Act to the legalization of abortion through the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v*

Wade in 1973. In those ten years, four separate but intimately connected issues transformed American political life beyond recognition, and would eventually trigger the emergence of a conservative “revival and reaction”: African-Americans’ struggle for meaningful equality; the irruption of the women’s liberation movement; President Lyndon Johnson’s push for social democratic-leaning reforms under the umbrella of the Great Society, and the emergence of an increasingly vocal anti-Vietnam War movement (Graham; Peel).

Up until 1963, the Civil Rights movement had focused on bringing an end to legally mandated discrimination against blacks in the South and had relied upon a rigorously non-violent strategy to achieve that end. However, the following two years saw the passage of civil rights and voting rights legislation accompanied by violent race riots in northern cities, such as in Harlem and Brooklyn in 1963, and again in New York in 1964 as well as in Philadelphia in 1964. This unrest quickly expanded to the west, such as the infamous Watts, L. A. riots of 1965, and to the rest of the country, such as the riots in Baltimore, Seattle, Newark, Atlanta and Oakland in 1966 and 1967 (Perlstein b, xx). As the movement leaned towards violence, its expansion beyond the segregated South also brought a qualitative change of objectives: from the ending of *de jure* discrimination below the Mason-Dixon Line towards demanding positive intervention on the part of federal authorities to achieve socioeconomic equality for African Americans throughout the nation. To put it in the terms used in those years, African-Americans moved from demanding equality of opportunity to calling for “equality of results” (Graham 455-457).

As has been abundantly demonstrated by the literature, the cultural and political scenario created between Lyndon Johnson’s victory in 1964 and Richard Nixon’s re-election of 1972 has remained notoriously stable up until today. Both the persistent, clearly structural reality of racial discrimination and the disruptive reaction of the African American community clearly links the actions of the less accommodationist black activists of the 1960s, such as Stokely Carmichael or the violent riots of that age with the recent activities of #*blacklivesmatter* and the disturbances that periodically follow instances of racially loaded police brutality (Edsall; Lassiter).

In the second place, at the same time that the Civil Rights movement evolved, President Lyndon Johnson pushed a broad

number of measures usually known as the “Great Society” aimed at improving the welfare of the less-favored (including many blacks) through federal programs. With the energy of a massive electoral victory over Barry Goldwater in 1964 and favored by a long period of near-uninterrupted economic expansion, the Johnson White House assumed new responsibilities in areas as varied as environmental conservation, consumer protection, and provision of medical assistance for the poor and the elderly. However, in less than four years the high expectations aroused by the Great Society had been met by a relative lack of success (despite the absolute rise in costs) and a deteriorating –albeit not yet as alarming as in the early 1970’s – economic situation. (Stein; Matusow; Sarias). As was the case with Civil Rights, the debates around the federal government’s responsibilities regarding the provision of welfare and, perhaps more importantly, the *terms* in which the debate took place during those crucial years, have remained “a fixed part of the American experience” up until the present day (Dallek, 374). After half a century both major parties are still, for instance, discussing the obligations of the federal authorities toward the supply of medical care against the demands of fiscal responsibility. It is no accident that the presidency of Barack Obama and the ascendancy of the Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 56, 171-177), as well as the presidential campaigns of 2016 and the primary season of 2019, have been dominated by whether and how to expand Medicare and Medicaid, both passed under Lyndon Johnson, “for all” (Dallek 196-201; Rosenthal; Uhrmacher *et al.*).

The third central element of civil discord during the second half of the 1960s was the growing opposition to the war in South East Asia, which galvanized students (mostly white and from middle-class backgrounds) in the universities towards a rebellious spiral that quickly passed from more or less peaceful protests on campuses throughout the nation, to violence and even terrorism on the part of a tiny minority, such as the famous Weather Underground (McGuirr 225-237; Micklethwait and Adrian Woodridge 64-68; Bell 88-89). Needless to say, the experience of anti-war dissent at home and of over-ambitious military missions abroad –the so-called “Vietnam syndrome”– which never quite left the American public consciousness once it had emerged during the second half of the 1960s (the best contemporary accounts remain Halberstam; Heller) has remained a central aspect of American politics as the war in Afghanistan remains an open-ended drain of American material, human and

emotional resources. That neoconservative foreign policy aggressiveness and the influence of neoconservative advisors upon hapless presidents has been near-universally emphasized and is yet another element of continuity (see for instance Halper and Clarke). So much so, in fact, that Gordon Golstein's *Lessons in Disaster*, analyzing the inglorious war in South East Asia, remained a prime source of analysis for Obama's advisors (Woodward 129-130, 154) while that war was also the object of Trump's first National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster's PhD dissertation, subsequently published under the title *Dereliction of Duty*. No wonder, then, that President Trump remains consistent in his promises of foreign disentanglement despite his otherwise erratic political outlook (see for instance Kube and Lee).

These three elements combined with rise of the women's liberation movement and changing sexual mores –not least, but not only among the young– which fostered the expansion of the counterculture beyond its narrow New York intellectual circles in parallel to the emergence of the political New Left. During these years, according to neoconservatives –who conflated all of the above with developments such as rising inflation in a single countercultural phenomenon– the liberal (in the American sense of the term) intelligentsia installed in the universities and the mass media also underwent a process of radicalization akin to the experience of blacks and the young. Intellectuals such as Norman Mailer, Barbara Gerson and Jack Kerouac, together with the rest of the beat generation, articulated a set of views soon to be known as the “counterculture.” Neoconservatives agreed that the atmosphere created by the dissatisfaction of African Americans and young women, and later on the gay community, together with the incapacity of the state to bring an end to poverty, and the brutalities committed in Vietnam, drove a growing number of intellectuals and leaders of opinion toward questioning not just the policies of the Johnson administration, but the very validity of received axioms at the heart of American society and politics (see for instance Kristol 54-74, particularly the brutal, even by the standards of the day, moralizing about the AIDS epidemic and homosexuality 63-67).

From the neoconservative perspective, all of a sudden and as Daniel Bell (then still a liberal but already moving towards a position friendly towards what would later be known as neo-conservatism) put it, the “New Left” (meaning the New Left, the Counterculture and assorted activists) had engaged in a “total” revolution of society,



starting with traditional mores about family life, sexual behavior and established authority, which were critically examined and found inadequate by what neoconservatives firmly believed were a minority of self-styled avant-garde intellectuals, who sought to spread their ideas through the mainstream mass media, the expanding body of university students and the nation at large (Bell 99; Kristol 116- 122; Cadushin 109-126). The connection between these early neoconservative assumptions and the persistence of the culture wars, particularly with regards to gender issues and, more recently, sexual orientation –including its evolution into debates about sexual identity that still remain too recent for adequate academic digestion– as well as its crystallization in the absolutely central role it occupies within Donald Trump’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of rightwing populism hardly requires illustration: the brutally misogynistic treatment of Hillary Clinton’s gender –as in, for instance, the thinly veiled reference to menstruation during the presidential debates (“Trump Mocks Clinton for Taking Toilet Break During Democratic Debate–Video”)– and with regards to journalist Mika Berzevinsky, combined with Trump’s consistent attacks on racial minorities (“Drug dealers, criminals, rapists’: What Trump thinks of Mexicans”), as well as the reluctance to expand federally provided healthcare to, among others, those very same minorities, are neither original nor particularly imaginative tropes: neoconservatives had already begun to develop them during the 1960s.

The rapid cultural changes unleashed during the 1960s formed the milieu within which neoconservatism formed. In this sense it is paramount to note that all early neoconservatives had belonged to the liberal intelligentsia associated with the Democratic Party and progressive liberalism. The “neo” in “neoconservative” refers to individuals who ended up joining the conservative ranks during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. According to the neoconservative self-image, this fracture within liberalism and the neoconservatives’ own collective road to Damascus was not triggered by their own shift to the right, but by the drift of their fellow liberal intellectuals toward the counterculture and the New Left. Indeed, these men and women continued to cling to a number of ideas previously accepted as part of the post-1945 liberal consensus and quite at variance with the proposals of other families of the American right, including the then dominant “hard core” conservatives gathered around the weekly *National Review* and galvanized during the 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater. Norman

Podhoretz and Irving Kristol, the two most prominent early neoconservatives, have been particularly clear about this aspect of their political evolution. Kristol, often termed the “godfather” of the neoconservatives, has been keen to emphasize that neoconservative “dissidence” from liberalism “accelerated” as a direct consequence of the counterculture and as “the spectrum of liberalism became even narrower” and “even more dogmatically left-leaning” (Blumenthal; Kristol, x-xi). Norman Podhoretz, Kristol’s fellow-traveler and long-time editor of the prestigious cultural journal *Commentary* labelled himself a “centrist,” and has always explained his abandonment of the liberal-progressive ship as a consequence of the New Left triumph. In his memoirs, Podhoretz explained how American progressivism had sustained itself as a force “against radicalism” up until the 1960’s, when it became “captured” by new left “radicals” (Podhoretz 16).

Podhoretz and Kristol were certainly not alone. However, it would be a mistake to believe that all who were associated with neoconservatism necessarily agreed on most issues, or even that neoconservatism possessed in any way a fixed set of principles to which all neoconservatives subscribed. On the contrary, they engaged in remarkably lively public policy and political debates and their individual views have varied over time. Kristol, for instance, likes to say that he has been “moving consistently to the right” and admits to considerable inconsistencies in his views over the long-term (Kristol ix). One of the most frequent collaborators with these journals, the philosopher Sydney Hook, continued to label himself as a “socialist,” no less, even after actively collaborating with the Nixon White House’s efforts against the student New Left (Baroody memorandum to Colson). Similarly, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, a young Democrat until the early 1970’s, recalled that she was “puzzled” when she was first labelled a “neoconservative” since she had never seen herself as a conservative, neither new nor of any other sort (Kirkpatrick “Neoconservatism” 235; Keene). Another member of the group, sociologist Nathan Glazer was, as early as 1971, particularly clear when in a famous article published in *Commentary*, he pointed out that the culture wars did not set conservatives against liberals, who shared certain basic values with one another, but pitted both groups against the “radicals” of the New Left who “wanted to change everything by revolutionary means.” Nevertheless, Glazer remained a steadfast supporter of the New Deal and, according to an active conservative Republican activist of those years, “probably never voted

Republican” (Bell; Podhoretz b). But then again, it is undeniable that a relatively cohesive group of thinkers and academics coalesced between 1965 and 1968 around *The Public Interest*, edited by Kristol, and *Commentary* edited by Podhoretz.

Thus, it is no accident that Podhoretz would entitle his memoirs *Breaking Ranks*. Neoconservatives, disgusted by the counterculture and the attitude of their fellow liberals (or “old friends”, as Podhoretz put it), found themselves increasingly on the conservative side of political debate, often after a personal catharsis which was, as in Kirkpatrick’s case, long drawn out, and sometimes, as in Sydney Hook’s and Nathan Glazer’s cases, life-long (Podhoretz 3-17; Keene; Bell; Blackwell; Rusher, *Rise*). The most important elements of neoconservatism follow quite closely the cleavage that erupted within American society itself: first a series of ethical and moral arguments aimed at preserving certain traditional values – notably about gender and race– from the culture wars of the 1960’s and 70’s. From the foregoing analysis stemmed the second aspect, which consisted of a set of technocratic recipes aimed at correcting the perceived mistakes of the Great Society in areas ranging from Civil Rights to welfare assistance and education. An article written by Jeanne Kirkpatrick after the 1972 presidential campaign abstracted quite graphically the main moral tenets that have guided neoconservatives ever since. According to Kirkpatrick, the 1960’s had unleashed a “cultural revolution” which would ultimately come to a head in the 1972 clash between Richard Nixon, who was by then running under a conservative or at least explicitly anti-New Left banner, and George McGovern, who had captured the Democratic nomination with an anti-war, New Left-leaning platform. McGovern was, in Kirkpatrick’s eyes, the “candidate of the counterculture” and of the “Triple A: Acid, Amnesty and Abortion” (Kirkpatrick c 58-62). The Democratic candidate certainly became the *bête noire* of an increasingly restless group of still-Democratic stalwarts: if Richard Nixon’s victory in 1968 marked the beginning of a consistent shift to the right in presidential politics, McGovern’s nomination in 1972 highlighted, at least according to neoconservatives, the corrosion of the Democratic Party which, according to them, had started with the candidacy of Eugene McCarthy in 1968. In Kristol’s view, McGovern’s candidacy “sent us a message that we were now off the liberal spectrum” (Kristol 32; Podhoretz 343-344).

Kirkpatrick’s “Acid” and “Abortion” represented the neoconservatives’ hostility towards new sexual and gender mores

that they interpreted as a crisis of values caused by of the rampant “hedonism” of the 1960’s, which was also reflected in the expansion of the recreational use of drugs such as marijuana and LSD. This, of course, has since become a key conservative trope that emerged and re-emerged later on: to deal with the heroin epidemic of the 1970s, the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 90s and the ongoing opioid epidemic (Kristol 54-74; Rothman; French). To neoconservatives, that hedonism had its roots in the “shallow, escapist” and “simplistic” attitude of the “new sensibility” manifested during the decade by some of their fellow intellectuals (Dickstein 66). Still worse, neoconservatives believed that the cultural zeitgeist of intellectuals’ irresponsibility eventually translated itself into a widespread challenge to *any* form of established authority, ranging from basic norms of courtesy to the collapse of academic standards and repeated instances of public disorders. As early as 1968 Nathan Glazer described student protesters as “luddite machine smashers” bent on a “scorched earth policy against the universities” (Glazer 20). Hedonism was also closely related to the demise of “Victorian values” which had resulted from the “sexual liberation movement”— equally deplored by neoconservatives (Sisk). In 1972, when Kirkpatrick was writing, abortion was not yet legalized but neoconservatives were already convinced that the counterculture, aided by medical developments such as the pill, was in the process of destroying the norms that had traditionally regulated family life and sexual practices. “Free love” and some radical forms of feminism had posited the family as an oppressive institution designed to repress individual freedom generally and in particular that of women and the young. Against the traditional family, the counterculture offered alternative models which went from hippie communes to, at least since the New York Stonewall Riots of 1969, a defense of gay family models. Under the epigraph of “abortion,” Kirkpatrick gathered a vigorous defense of traditional values regarding family and sex, which neoconservatives saw as the roots of “Western civilization,” and which would subsequently lead them to propose increasingly drastic measures such as censorship of pornography and the return of women to the “true freedom” of the domestic sphere snatched from them by radical feminism (Thompson 58; Kristol ; Decter 44, 45).

When Kirkpatrick mentioned “Amnesty” as the second of the “triple A’s,” she explicitly deplored McGovern’s intention to pardon the dozens of young students who had chosen to escape the draft and the Vietnam War. Although Kirkpatrick articulated a vigorous

defense of patriotism, this position should not be conflated with the foreign-policy hawkishness often displayed by neoconservative spokespeople. Firstly, Kirkpatrick was rather continuing with the Democratic Cold War stance that had guided presidents Truman, Kennedy and Johnson, and which would be maintained during the early 1970's by men such as Kirkpatrick's mentor, Democratic Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson (Phillips; Seltzer 22-23; Moynihan 38-39). Neoconservatives took pains to emphasize that despite the flirtations with communism of prominent liberal figures, such as infamous FDR staffer-cum-Soviet spy Alger Hiss or former Vice-President Henry Wallace, most progressives from the late 1940s to the 1960s had remained firmly within the vigorously patriotic anti-communist consensus. Secondly, virtually all neoconservatives were reacting against the Vietnam-induced New Left critique of American society. After the Tet offensive of 1968, individuals such as Podhoretz and Kristol freely admitted that the war in South East Asia "didn't work," had been a terrible mistake and was quite possibly irremediably lost, but they flatly refused to admit that, as the counterculture claimed, the horrors of Vietnam were a symptom of the moral bankruptcy of the United States' social and cultural backbone. It was post-McGovern Democrats, neoconservatives argued, who were reverting to isolationism as a consequence of their lack of faith in American (or Western) civilization. As Norman Podhoretz asserted, neoconservatives were not in favor of the war, but "against the movement against the war" (Podhoretz b). In other words, patriotism against a clique of treacherous intellectuals became a central element –together with traditional morality and a controlled but market friendly economy– of the neoconservative canon. Needless to say, when Donald Trump repeatedly labels –not least in the State of the Union address– "liberals" as "un-American" and quite possibly "treasonous," he is merely reproducing this anti-elitist trope aimed at that liberal elite installed in the media and the universities as well as in large corporations (McLaughlin).

Of course, in the neoconservative vision that liberal elite is also installed in government. A further and frequently forgotten aspect of neoconservatism was its technocratic character, for one of the distinctive characteristics of neoconservatives has been their remarkable ability to produce specific public-policy proposals. In fact, the first publication clearly identifiable as neoconservative, *The Public Interest*, was exclusively devoted to the analysis and proposal of domestic policy-making initiatives. Its pages gathered the work of

those such as politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan, sociologist Nathan Glazer and public policy professor-cum-political scientist James Q. Wilson. The personal trajectories of Moynihan and Wilson are both good examples of technocratic neoconservatism. Both men had left academic life to work within Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, Wilson in crime prevention and Moynihan in race-related issues and the fight against poverty; both suffered a similar disenchantment with the lack of apparent improvement and the violent fashion in which the poor, and particularly African-Americans, seemed to be venting their frustration (Moynihan's own home was attacked by radicals); and both wound up working for Richard Nixon, espousing proposals highly critical of what they interpreted as liberal "softness" towards delinquency and favoring a greater emphasis on "individual responsibility" and "self-reliance" (Hodgson 123-126; Wilson 71-78). The path followed by these two men does, at any rate, reflect quite nicely the neoconservatives' proximity to power and the crucial part played by the decade between 1963 and 1973.

What neoconservatives perceived as the excesses of the Great Society drove these men toward the basic conclusions that would distinguish neoconservatives from both liberal-progressives (social democrats in European terms) and traditional American conservatives of the *National Review*/Barry Goldwater variety. Firstly, since the late 1960's, neoconservatives adopted certain, but not all, of the anti-statist, laissez-faire theses developed by neoclassical liberals such as Milton Friedman, Friedrich von Hayek and Henry Hazlitt and enthusiastically espoused by the likes of Goldwater. Thus, neoconservatives accepted that state action could not solve *all* problems and that in *some* cases public policy actually worsened the situation, but unlike the neoliberals, neoconservatives always remained stubborn supporters of the New Deal, which they contrasted to the excesses of the Great Society, and granted a relatively large role to the state in assisting the needy (Podhoretz b).<sup>3</sup> Civil Rights was a case in point during the late 1960's. During his years within the Johnson Administration, Moynihan used the statistics of the Department of Labor to demonstrate that one of the

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<sup>3</sup> One of the most recent examples has been the confrontation between the neoconservative-leaning "compassionate conservatism" adopted by the Bush Jr., administration and neoliberalism, illustrated in the political memoir of George W. Bush staffer Michael Gerson, *Heroic Conservatism. Why Republicans Need to Embrace America's Ideals (And Why They Deserve to Fail If They Don't)*. HarperCollins, 2007.

main obstacles to the emergence of a black middle-class was, of all things, government assistance to single-parent families. According to Moynihan, financial subsidies to single mothers had the “unintended effect” of stimulating the breakup of the family unit because they favored the “expulsion of the man” (Moynihan b). Hence, a measure designed to provide short-term support for the poor actually contributed to the creation of long-term damage by trapping poor blacks in a cycle of broken families. Of course, Civil Rights supporters quipped that Moynihan, who advised a period of “benign neglect” on the part of the Federal government, was effectively blaming the victims –that is, African American families; today one would add women and mothers to boot– for their plight while advising the Federal government to retreat from further action (Hodgson 157–5; Baroody memorandum to Colson; Moynihan *Coping* 208–209). Looking at current American politics, it is not difficult to find the exact same debate being reproduced in the exact same terms between Trump and his critics (Rubin; Khan and Cook). Except in this case, the racially loaded blame-the-victim politics are not accompanied by anything resembling the neoconservative’s policy-analysis sophistication.

A second, but perhaps most crucial “unexpected effect” in Moynihan’s assessment was the emergence of a “new class” made up of the bureaucrats necessary to design and manage government policy. According to the neoconservative critique this new bureaucracy, however well meaning, would soon become more concerned with protecting its own interests than those of its supposed protégées. Not only that; neoconservatives were also quick to note that civil servants working for the welfare state were mostly white middle-class graduates from the same universities dominated by New Left “radical” academics. It was no accident, neoconservatives claimed, that the main bastion of radicalism was also the place that produced the personnel that manned the large bureaucracies it defended. As Kristol argued, the American working class was actually “far less consumed with egalitarian bitterness or envy than are college professors or affluent journalists” (Kristol 173). Along similar lines, Seymour Martin Lipset also emphasized how the “ideological *slope*” of American academia was consistently toward radicalism, to a point where college professors were “well to the left” of even “the main body of college graduates,” never mind the bulk of working and middle class Americans (Lipsett and Ladd 112, 109; emphasis in original). But if race and poverty were the issues of the

day, neoconservatives applied the same analysis to virtually every aspect of public policy, from health care to crime and the environment, and ever since have insisted on the need to channel public funds through “private, group, voluntary and non state” organizations,” which they believe are closer to the actual beneficiary and therefore more efficient and less prone to generate unintended negative effects (Glazer “Paradoxes” 82; Kristol *Two Cheers* 30). Again, the same arguments are regularly reproduced and found in 21<sup>st</sup>-century American politics: Donald Trump’s “swamp,” for instance, is certainly made up of politicians and lobbyists, but it also contains the dastardly members of the “deep state” (not coincidentally conflated with “the left” and “the fake media”), which turns out to be just a new term for, as we have seen, a very old trope (as quoted in Sevastopoulo). Similarly, onetime Trump ideological Svengali Steve Bannon’s oft-repeated need to “deconstruct the administrative state” harked back to those late 1960s and early 1970s neoconservative criticisms of the, according to them, bloated, self-serving and counterproductive Great Society (Rucker and Costa).

It is however important to emphasize that neoconservative hostility towards the negative aspects of the Great Society never quite provoked a conversion to the traditional American conservatism represented by the campaign of the 1964 Republican candidate Barry Goldwater. Traditionalist conservatives, such as writers Russell Kirk and James Burnham, abhorred “modernity” to the point of denouncing the emergence of sociology (Kirk thought the radio and the electric bulb were also suspect), and instead hankered after an idealized image of a rural, pre-modern past. Neoconservatives however, far from attacking the social sciences or technological advances per se, were professionally engaged in “public service” sciences and had a less guarded take on scientific progress (Kass 18-27; Wills 46-48; Nash, 176–183). Furthermore, neoconservatives always realized that traditionalist conservatives tended to be too “aristocratic” and, more specifically “British-like,” and hence had a relatively narrow appeal to Americans. They therefore self-consciously aimed at generating arguments more closely attuned to the American public: instead of looking back to an idealized Middle Age, neoconservatives defended a revival of the considerably more familiar 1950’s, a decade described in *Commentary* as “an oasis of stability and rationality in Western affairs” (Mander 64; Norman Podhoretz “Telephone”). Similarly, unlike neoclassical liberals, neoconservatives never pursued a



“minimal state” nor disputed the need for public policymaking as such. In fact, neoconservatives proposed a relatively paternalistic and authoritarian state ready to provide assistance for the needy and willing to actively protect certain “traditional” values. As Kristol expressed in one of his famous dictums, neoconservatives were only willing to proclaim “two cheers” for capitalism (Kristol (c) ix-x). In more pragmatic terms, neoconservatives also recognized very early on that any proposal to dismantle the welfare state was likely to become political suicide. And politicians, they knew, were vital to the exercise of power and influence (Kristol 212, 282; Podhoretz “Telephone”). Thus, in response to the collapse of Keynesian economics, neoconservatives did not offer the recipe of monetarism sponsored by most neoliberal economists and conventional American conservatives alike, but so-called supply-side economics (later taken up by Ronald Reagan), which seemed to offer the possibility of maintaining a certain level of government services while preventing unwanted expansion by reducing taxes (Wanniski; Stein 237 - 249). Half a century later, the exact same model of authoritarian, paternalistic state combined with business-friendly overtures and tax cuts for the wealthier segments of society is back in the Oval Office. Minus, it cannot possibly be over-emphasized, the technical know-how and expertise. What for neoconservatives was policy, for Donald Trump has become mere political advertising.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite the obvious detestation that the leading neoconservatives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century show towards the rightwing populism of Donald Trump (Yglesias; Heilbrunn), neither the President nor neoconservatives have been able to escape one another. Besides technical expertise, the enduring relevance of neoconservatives themselves and the importance of the neoconservative critique has been magnified and prolonged over time by two other phenomena that emerged after the 1960s. Firstly, Keynesian economics suffered a grave crisis that resulted in prolonged stagflation, which combined with the evident lack of solutions offered by Keynesian economists opened the door to the then less orthodox conservative proposals such as supply-side and “trickle down” economics (Stedman Jones 254-272), which were eventually adopted by Ronald Reagan. Secondly and most importantly, neoconservatives have consistently shown a remarkable

willingness to accommodate the populist wing of the American right. As the American electorate sent Richard Nixon to the White House, the 1968 presidential race also saw the enormous national success of George Wallace, the former Governor of Alabama best known for having defended “segregation yesterday, segregation today, segregation forever” (Carter 88, 96). Wallace’s success running a campaign based on a populist defense of traditional values, law and order and quite open racism propelled Nixon and his White House further to the right and reflected the fact that, whatever the views of the *intelligentsia* and the young, the electorate was manifesting its exhaustion with the perceived demands of racial minorities and the changes imposed by the counterculture (Scammon and Wattenberg; Phillips “Emerging”).

Neoconservatives, needless to say, fully realized (and much celebrated) this change of public mood, but it was a group of young conservative activists who, headed by Richard Viguerie, Paul Weyrich, Morton Blackwell and Howard Phillips, organized the birth of the so-called New Right in the early 1970’s (Wilson and Wilde; Hacker ). Unlike neoconservatism, the New Right adopted a clearly populist strategy aimed at capturing the growing conservatism of the electorate and managed to enlist, with the priceless collaboration of the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision, the support of Reverend Jerry Fallwell and his, until then apolitical, evangelical conservative movement. It is important to note that, although neoconservatives were increasingly influenced by religious views, the behavior of the New Right differed greatly from the considerably more elitist neoconservatives, who never created or even tried to mobilize a popular mass base (Peele 51). From their new bases in think-tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute and the California-based Hoover Institution, the neoconservatives’ proposals gained considerably more weight than anyone could have expected in an electoral atmosphere increasingly loaded with rising conservatism. It is therefore no surprise that neoconservatives, although retaining most of their self-conscious elitism, chose to “not worry” about (and rather welcome) the “new populism” of the Christian Right, while the political leaders of the New Right remained quite sympathetic to neoconservative spokespeople (Kristol 359; Podhoretz “Telephone”, Phillips; Blackwell; Keene). Both groups had an enormous impact in helping to modernize the message of an American conservative movement that was, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, in severe

danger of losing touch with its own grass roots. Neoconservatives contributed to making the transition from a movement focused on issues such as Civil Rights and anti-communism towards a conservatism increasingly capable of connecting those issues with a message ostensibly centered on fighting the cultural wars that have marked American politics for the last half century (Judis, 342; Blackwell; Keene).

In short, the 1960s and early 1970s bequeathed incoming generations a world in which neoconservatism became the intellectual spearhead of rightwing political action. To this day, politics and policymaking retain a potent neoconservative flair, which must be added to the considerable vigor of neoconservative principles in the enduring cultural wars still coloring American public life. When asked to what period he wanted to take American back to make it great “again,” Trump resuscitated the neoconservative affection and romanticizing of the by now mythical “50s” (Krieg; Sanger and Haberman). As a journalist reminded the delegates to the 2016 Republican convention, this was a period when General Dwight Eisenhower was indeed in the White House, but was also when women happened to be subordinated inside the home and racial minorities (notably African Americans) were firmly within their separated and emphatically unequal social and political roles. Once reminded of these not so minor historical nuances, the aforementioned delegates swiftly shifted their assessment of an idyllic past from the 1950s to Reagan’s 1980s, which were also a high point of neoconservative influence (Newton-Small). President Trump, however, has remained firm in both his purported principles and, most importantly, in his message.

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