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A liberalism betrayed? American neoconservatism and the theory of international relations

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ABSTRACT *This article analyses the ideological and theoretical underpinnings of neoconservative discourses on international relations. It moves beyond recent polemics and debates over the Bush administration's foreign policy to offer a deeper look at the intellectual premises of the peculiar synthesis of realism and idealism which characterizes the neoconservative mode of political engagement with the world. Looking at the domestic and foreign policy dimensions of neoconservative political sociology, the article argues that neoconservatism is not the centrist 'liberal' conservatism that it pretends to be (and that many foreign policy analysts have diagnosed in recent years). It argues that to the extent that neoconservatism is committed to the Enlightenment narrative of human rights and liberal democracy, these commitments are predicated on an atavistic conservative philosophy that is in fact ferociously predatory on liberal values and liberal mechanisms of governance. The aim here is not to provide a normative defence of liberalism as such. Yet, situating neoconservatism within the broad church of liberal political theory tends to eclipse all that is specific to neoconservatism as an ideology. It endows this militaristic approach to social order with a progressive ethical gloss that it does not deserve, and it consequently muddles debates over the limits and desirability of liberal values and practices in world politics.*

Neoconservatism tries to 'reach beyond' contemporary liberalism in the way that all reformations, religious or political, do—by a return to the original sources of liberal vision and liberal energy so as to correct the warped version of liberalism that is today's orthodoxy.

—Irving Kristol¹

On 18 September 2009, Irving Kristol, the founding father of American neoconservatism, died aged 89. A close reader of Leo Strauss as well as a remarkable ideological entrepreneur (the two are not so obviously reconcilable), Kristol and his followers had a tremendous impact on the outlook of the American Right since the 1960s.² As the *Economist* wrote in its obituary pages, ‘American conservatism, before Kristol began to shake it up, was dour, backward-looking, anti-intellectual and isolationist, especially when viewed from the east coast. By the time Mr Kristol—and like-minded colleagues such as Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Bell and Nathan Glazer—had finished with it, it was modern and outward-looking, plumped up with business-funded fellowships and think-tanks and taking the lead in all policy debates’.³

Kristol’s death and the vast amount of commentaries it generated in the American media and elsewhere has drawn attention once more to the resilience of the neoconservative movement. Recently, however, it is mainly within the domain of foreign policy that Kristol’s followers have attracted the most attention to themselves. Neoconservatives took credit for the content of the so-called Bush doctrine and the US National Security Strategy of 2002. They also provided much of the ideological impetus for the invasion and ongoing occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴ Given the poor performances of the Republican Party in the latest congressional and presidential elections, many expected the neoconservative project to collapse with the demise of the Bush presidency. But this has simply not been the case. In spite of the vilification of Bush’s ‘neoconservative presidency’ in the media and elsewhere, neoconservatism has very much remained *the* official representative of the broader conservative movement in mainstream newspapers, cable news and radio talk shows. As one of their right-wing critics complained, ‘Not even the feverish denunciation of President George W. Bush as a warmonger by *American Conservative*’s Old Right critics of the war, former Undersecretary of the Treasury Paul Craig Roberts and Pat Buchanan has spurred the “liberal establishment” to reconsider its debating partners’.⁵ Neoconservatives have not only retained a strong presence in the media. They have also recently launched a number of new political platforms, such as Global Governance Watch and the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI), from which they now lead the Republican opposition against the ‘post-imperial’ diplomacy of President Barack Obama. As the FPI’s mission statement makes clear, neoconservatives may have just lost one of their leading intellectuals, but neoconservatism is alive, well and undeterred by the recent turn of events:

There are those who hope we can just return to normalcy—to pre-9/11 levels of defense spending and pre-9/11 tactics. They argue for a retreat from America’s global commitments and a renewed focus on problems at home, an understandable if mistaken response to these difficult economic times. In fact, strategic overreach is not the problem and retrenchment is not the solution.... Our economic difficulties will not be solved by retreat from the international arena. They will be made worse. In this new era, the consequences of failure and the risks of retreat would be even greater than before. The challenges we face require 21st century strategies and tactics based on a renewed commitment to American leadership. The United States remains the world’s indispensable nation—indispensable

to international peace, security, and stability, and indispensable to safe-guarding and advancing the ideals and principles we hold dear.⁶

This article analyses the ideological and theoretical underpinnings of neoconservative discourses on international relations. It moves beyond recent polemics and debates over the Bush administration's foreign policy to offer a deeper look at the intellectual premises of the peculiar synthesis of realism and idealism which characterizes the neoconservative mode of political engagement with the world. Looking at the domestic and foreign policy dimensions of neoconservative political sociology, the article argues and demonstrates that this 'new' conservatism is not the centrist, 'liberal' conservatism that it pretends to be—and that many analysts have diagnosed.

Liberalism, of course, is a broad church constituted by many contending variants—classical liberalism, New Deal liberalism, pragmatic liberalism, neoliberalism, Rawlsian liberalism, etc. In the US, this ideological contest has generated a liberal tradition notorious for its tendency to evade a precise definition in favour of manifestly vague descriptions: 'American liberalism has been defined as much by its champions as by its critics, each having absorbed something of the other's perspective'.⁷ Neoconservatism thrives on this muddled ideological terrain. And its claims to the tradition of liberal democracy must be assessed in the light of the broad and imprecise meaning of liberalism in American public discourse. Yet for the term 'liberalism' to have any meaning at all (in an Anglo-Saxon context at least), it must nevertheless refer to a cluster of Enlightenment values predicated on a distinctively modern conception of man and society. As John Gray explains:

Liberalism is individualist, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any other social collectivity; egalitarian inasmuch as it confers on all humans the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings; universalist, affirming the moral unity of the human species and according secondary importance to specific historical associations and cultural forms; and meliorist in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements.⁸

My contention is that to the extent that neoconservatism is committed to this discourse, these commitments are subordinated to an authoritarian form of cultural conservatism that is in fact ferociously predatory on liberal values—both in domestic and global politics. Over the years, scholars of all theoretical and political persuasions (including many neoconservatives) have used a variety of evocative Wilsonian slogans to describe the neoconservative approach to world order—'Wilsonianism in boots',⁹ 'hard Wilsonianism',¹⁰ 'closet Wilsonianism',¹¹ 'Realistic Wilsonianism',¹² 'Wolfish Wilsonians',¹³ 'Hobbes meets Kant',¹⁴ etc. I argue here that these Wilsonian tropes are misleading. For they suggest that neoconservatism resorts to realist means to pursue liberal ends and deepen the normative fabric of the global liberal order. This is simply not the case. Neoconservatives are conservatives 'all the way down'. Their attachment to liberalism in foreign affairs is predicated on an atavistic conservative philosophy

at the service of values—hierarchy, elitism, nationalism, community, sacrifice—that are inimical to the transformative mechanisms of liberal governance. My aim is not to provide a normative defence of liberalism as such, nor is it to exonerate liberal internationalist ideas from having anything to do with the failure of American foreign policy in the Middle East.¹⁵ Yet, situating neoconservatism within the broad church of liberal political theory tends to eclipse all that is specific to neoconservatism as an ideology. It endows this militaristic approach to social order with a progressive ethical gloss that it does not deserve, and it consequently muddles debates over the limits and desirability of liberal values and practices in world politics.

Domesticating anarchy: the critique of realism

The so-called liberals are being defeated by their enemies, but liberalism is being saved.

—Harvey Mansfield¹⁶

As suggested in the introduction, neoconservatism owes its longevity and successes in US politics in great part to the fact that it is both a retort to liberalism and a self-confident assertion of some of its most contested values. Indeed, according to neoconservatives, it is they who are the true heirs of the liberal tradition in America. Neoconservatives see themselves as the guardians of a ‘liberalism betrayed’ by the events of the 1960s.¹⁷ As Tod Lindberg explains, ‘what is being conserved is *our* liberalism—its extension in time and space’.¹⁸

Neoconservatism crystallized as a movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a reaction to the collapse of the post-war liberal consensus in the face of social and cultural diversification. First-generation neoconservatives had been supporters of the New Deal and the centre-liberal consensus that had kept America united in the face of the communist threat during the first two decades of the post-war period. By the mid-1960s, however, they had grown uncomfortable with what they saw as the radicalism of the civic right movement and the increasingly left-wing tendencies of liberal discourses. Utopian and overly confident in the promises of rationalism and social engineering, New Deal liberalism had fostered a culture of heightened social expectations and rights claims that American institutions could not sustain. It made promises that it could not keep. Now the Left was criticizing not the government but America as a nation for failing to live up to the Enlightenment ideals that it had historically claimed for itself. As the Vietnam War escalated abroad and race and student riots broke out at home, neoconservatives became concerned with the loss of authority of state institutions. Overcrowded with special interest groups and overloaded with unrealistic democratic demands, this ‘new’ liberalism no longer recognized the limits of pluralist democracy. It slowly nibbled at the concrete power of the state, and sought to emancipate civil society from the politics of hierarchy and national security upon which this very same civil society in fact depends for its own prosperity.

Neoconservatives never got over the events of the 1960s. As Joshua Muravchik explains, 'The loose group of us who felt impelled by the antics of the 1960s to migrate from the political left to right must have numbered fewer than 100. And we were proven losers at Washington's power game: the left drove us from the Democratic Party, stole the "liberal" label, and successfully affixed to us the name "neoconservative"'.¹⁹ Today, more than four decades after the collapse of the liberal consensus, neoconservatives maintain that the adversarial ethos of the cultural avant-garde still dominates the *Zeitgeist*, but it is no longer creative and capable of generating a normative environment that provides individuals with a sense of ontological security, and the community with a compelling collective narrative from which to formulate its hegemonic foreign policy. As James Ceasar puts it, 'Just as we live in a "postmodern" era in art and philosophy because no new theme has replaced "modernist" ideas, so we live in a post-Cold War world because no new foreign policy has been developed for our age'.²⁰ The problem, as neoconservatives see it, is that 'from having been the aggressive doctrine of vigorous, spirited men, liberalism has become hardly more than a trembling in the presence of illiberalism' (Harvey Mansfield).²¹ American liberalism has abandoned its universalist commitments in favour of a divisive politics of identity that embraces multiculturalism and individual self-realization with complete disregard for the republican legacy of the American Revolution and the preservation of the 'American creed'. In the words of Dinesh D'Souza, 'liberalism has become the party of anti-Americanism, economic plunder, and immorality. By contrast, conservative policies are not only more likely to produce the good society, they are also the best means to achieve liberal goals such as peace, tolerance, and social justice'.²²

Neoconservative foreign policy thinking must be understood in the context of this same set of events and responses to the perceived crisis of American liberal democracy. To the extent that neoconservatism can be thought of as a foreign policy doctrine as such, it grew out of a critique of Henry Kissinger's détente diplomacy and his attempted 'de-ideologization' of American foreign policy on the back of the collapsing liberal consensus of the post-war period. As Jeremy Suri argued in his insightful *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (2003), détente and the turn to realism under Kissinger was a response to the relative decline of American power and the disorienting socio-cultural experience that accompanied this process. Détente was a profoundly conservative diplomatic strategy that sacrificed domestic reforms for the sake of international stability. It stemmed in great part, and somewhat paradoxically, from a growing urge for domestic stability among leaders who could no longer assume that they commanded legitimacy in the eyes of their own citizenry. Brandt, de Gaulle, Nixon, Brezhnev and Mao all used the prospects of great power cooperation to denounce domestic unrest and argue that their respective domestic opponents threatened international peace.²³

With the rise of other centres of power in Europe and Asia, and given the disrepute that Vietnam had brought upon US diplomatic narratives of progress, many within the policy-making community and the wider public greeted

Kissinger's neo-Metternichean diplomacy as a sound strategy to ensure the longevity of American power. The neoconservatives did not. In their view, the depreciation of universal moral values and ideology in Kissinger's framework had led him to misunderstand the nature of the Soviet enemy. Kissinger, as Norman Podhoretz explained in a 1981 article, 'saw the Soviet-Union as a nation-state like any other, motivated by the same range of interests that define and shape the foreign policy of all nation-states'.²⁴ According to Podhoretz and his colleagues, this was a gross underestimation of the role of domestic institutions in international relations. The Soviet Union was not a traditional state but represented 'a radically different idea about how to organize social, political, and economic life on this earth'. It was prisoner of its own ideology in a way that forced its elite onto an expansionist path that defied traditional understandings of the national interest. Neoconservatives argued that although communist leaders might no longer believe in Marxism–Leninism, it remained their only source of legitimation in the domestic sphere. Hence, they could not be satisfied with strictly maintaining the status quo; their own political survival depended on the progressive establishment of subdued satellite states.²⁵

Conversely, and more importantly, neoconservatives saw Kissinger's narrowing re-definition of the American national interest as a relativistic and 'amoral' negation of the ideological essence of the nation that was just as 'un-American' as New Left accusations of US imperialism. As Walter Lacquer put it in a vicious attack on the newly promoted Secretary of State in 1973, Kissinger 'is an unassimilated outsider...a European by heritage and cultural choice, a cosmopolitan by circumstance, and American by deliberate (and hazardous) calculation...he revealed the derivative nature of his national identity in an almost pathetic fashion'.²⁶ Although *détente* had to a certain extent contributed in calming domestic unrest, neoconservatives complained that the 'anti-ideological' and secretive manoeuvring with which Kissinger conducted his realist diplomacy had fostered cynicism among the populace and isolated domestic opponents from the political process without ever re-assimilating them. After having failed to gain the support of trade unions and link with the formal organizations of the Old Left in the 1960s, the new social movements emerging out of the defeated democratic surges rejected party politics and formal organized representations altogether.²⁷ Instead, they favoured alternative postmodern, multicultural discourses of individuated emancipation driven by a deep distrust of all party and state institutions. This new, multicultural politics of identity asked not for tolerance but for the public affirmation of individual and group differences—not as pathological deviations to be accepted reluctantly by the majority, but as worthy ways of leading individual and collective life. In the eyes of its advocates, this represented a fight for self-determination and human dignity against the false universalisms of the establishment and the hegemony of the heterosexual, White Anglo-Saxon majority culture. For neoconservatives, it was a national tragedy, a self-defeating celebration of difference for difference's sake that lethally undermined the unity and will to power of the nation.

Over the years, this critique of Kissingerian diplomacy has grown into a more general critique of realism as such and served as a powerful rhetorical *point d'appui* for the rationalization of democracy promotion initiatives since the mid-1980s. According to neoconservatives, realism lacks an adequate understanding of the crucial role of foreign policy in fixing the cultural content of citizenship and constructing the forms of subjectivities necessary to sustain a hegemonic foreign policy. In their view, realism's insistence on ideological sobriety and on the exclusion of moral values from foreign policy-making leaves its proponents incapable of articulating a vision for America that goes beyond narrow strategic calculations. In turn, this incapacity to link moral and identity issues to American power and international engagement fosters distrust and pessimism towards politics within the population and ultimately leads to the subordination of foreign and public policy to private and individual concerns. Hence, far from providing a sound basis for statecraft and foreign policy-making, realism's reactive and materialistic outlook ultimately fails to generate the domestic commitments necessary for the pursuit of even the most basic foreign policy objectives.²⁸ As Robert Kagan and William Kristol argued in their 1996 'neo-Reaganite' manifesto:

Without a broad, sustaining foreign policy vision, the American people will be inclined to withdraw from the world and will lose sight of their abiding interest in vigorous world leadership. Without a sense of mission, they will seek deeper and deeper cuts in the defense and foreign affairs budgets and gradually decimate the tools of U.S. hegemony Without a broader, more enlightened understanding of America's interests, conservatism will too easily degenerate into the pinched nationalism of Buchanan's 'America First' A true 'conservatism of the heart' ought to emphasize both personal and national responsibility, relish the opportunity for national engagement, embrace the possibility of national greatness, and restore a sense of the heroic, which has been sorely lacking in American foreign policy—and American conservatism in recent years.²⁹

Beyond these domestic concerns, neoconservatives also criticize realism for its overly static interpretation of history and understanding of the causes of war in world politics. First of all, they disagree categorically with the fundamental assumptions of structural realism. For them, the idea that war and competition between states are the inevitable by-product of the anarchical character of the international system as such is a positivist heresy that bears witness to the decay of American universities. Against such relativistic follies, neoconservatives insist (quite correctly) that the structural realist thesis in fact rests upon a set of *a priori* assumptions about the self-interested and competitive character of human nature without which the war-prone, self-help logic of anarchy posited by structural realists would make no sense at all. Neoconservatives share the classical realist view that war and conflict are ultimately rooted in man's natural drive for self-preservation, competition, vainglory and, importantly, universal recognition. Against classical realists, however, they insist that these natural impulses are cultivated, mediated and channelled by historically evolving institutions, ideology and cultural norms. Consequently, each state will relate differently to the

international struggle for power depending on its size and on the nature of its political regime—i.e. on the character of its institutions, its cultural makeup and the degree of modernization that it has achieved.³⁰ Francis Fukuyama offers the classic statement in *The End of History and the Last Man*. It is worth citing at length:

The international order described by realists closely resembles the state of nature of Hobbes, where man is a state of war of all against all. But Hobbes's state of war does not arise out of the simple desire for self-preservation, but because self-preservation co-exists with vanity or the desire for recognition. Were there not some men who desired to impose their views upon others, particularly those imbued with a spirit of religious fanaticism, then Hobbes himself would argue that the primordial state of war would never arise in the first place. Self-preservation alone is not sufficient to explain the war of all against all The realist contention that states perceive each other as threats and arm themselves accordingly does not arise from the system so much as from a hidden assumption that human societies in their international behaviour tend to resemble Hegel's master seeking recognition, or the vainglorious first man of Hobbes, rather than the timid solitary of Rousseau The realist, then, can deduce nothing at all from the bare facts of the distribution of power within the state system. Such information becomes meaningful only if he or she makes certain assumptions about the nature of the societies constituting the system, namely, that at least some of them seek recognition rather than mere self-preservation In sharp distinction to every other aspect of human and political social life, realism portrays international relations as isolated in a timeless vacuum, immune from the evolutionary processes taking place around it. But those apparent continuities in world politics from Thucydides to the Cold War in fact mask significant differences in the manner in which societies seek, control, and relate to power.³¹

The reader familiar with the work of Leo Strauss will have recognized this 'regime-centred' neo-Hobbesian narrative. The importance of regime type in shaping both domestic and world politics is one of the most important connections between Leo Strauss and American neoconservatism. According to the Straussian theory of regime, each regime is the 'outcome of a struggle over which human type or types will be morally preponderant' and advance a notion of justice and the common good that will guide political action towards particular ends. Whereas a neoliberal, commercially driven regime will produce a hedonistic citizenry, an oppressive regime that suppresses free association through violence will produce a violent opposition and a citizenry with violent tendencies since participation in this oppressive regime is based on the potential for violent compulsions.³² Because the regime of a country 'shapes the "way of life" more than any other formative factor except for human nature itself', the struggle between those who wish to define the regime is 'the supremely important contest in human existence'—the essence of the political.³³ As Steven Lenzner and William Kristol explained in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq War, 'To understand political life in terms of regimes is to recognize that political life always partakes of both the universal (principles of justice or rule) and the particular ("our" borders, language, customs, etc.). President Bush's advocacy of "regime change"—which avoids the pitfalls of a wishful global universalism on the one hand, and a fatalistic cultural

determinism on the other—is a not altogether unworthy product of Strauss's rehabilitation of the notion of regime'.³⁴

From this perspective, the realist precept that friends and enemies ought to be chosen on the basis of their power rather than ideology is not just morally repelling but also strategically self-defeating. Realists who seek to maintain international order through a balance of military power often paradoxically find themselves accommodating and sometimes even in alliance with powerful regimes who have a long-term existential interest in undermining American hegemony to bolster their domestic legitimacy. This is why, although 'no doctrine of foreign policy can do away with the need for judgement and prudence, and for weighing competing moral considerations', realism cannot be a viable path in the long term. Only a sustained effort to implant stable democracies in zones of conflict will insure the long-term security of the US.³⁵ During the Cold War, neoconservatives saw democracy promotion as a means of immunizing the periphery from the appeal of communism. Today it is seen as a means to hive off the terrorist potentiality of Arab and Islamic political culture, which are seen to be particularly resistant to the globalizing forces of liberal modernization.³⁶ In the words of Charles Krauthammer, democratization in the post-9/11 era is 'about America "coming ashore" to effect a "pan-Arab reformation"...and change the very culture of the Middle East, to open its doors to democracy and modernity'.³⁷

Regimenting democracy

It is this emphasis on regime type and democracy promotion that often leads international relations analysts to associate neoconservatism with the Kantian democratic peace thesis and the Wilsonian tradition in US foreign policy. But this association must be treated with caution. As we will remember, neoconservatives spent the best part of the 1960s and 1970s ranting against what they saw as the 'democratic excesses' of the student movement and the hopeless democratization ambitions of liberal modernization theorists in the Third World.³⁸ While they were *in principle* committed to the *defence* of democracy in the world during those decades, it is only since the early to mid-1980s that they began to seriously talk about proactively *exporting* democracy as a viable foreign policy objective. William Kristol admitted so much in an interview with James Mann during the build-up to the Iraq War: 'I don't think that neoconservatives at that time [prior to the mid-1980s] were particularly strong supporters of democracy.'³⁹ And we should also remember that even after the 1980s, neoconservatives have never shied away from supporting right-wing authoritarian regimes and counter-revolutionary forces whenever and wherever this was deemed necessary to further America's 'vital interests'.⁴⁰

The 'democratic turn' in neoconservative foreign policy discourses in the mid-1980s was part of a broader policy shift instituted by the Reagan administration from covertly supporting right-wing authoritarianism to promoting democracy through the newly and purposively established National Endowment for Democracy (NED). As various analysts have argued, this shift was above all

a pre-emptive measure to secure elite and American interests against more radical changes in the light of the mass mobilization of anti-authoritarian movements that took place during the 1970s and early 1980s.⁴¹ After the revolt of Gdansk and the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland in December 1981, neoconservatives also began to worry that the US could be losing the war of ideas with the Soviet Union if Reagan did not align itself clearly with the forces of democracy at this important historical juncture.⁴² They were particularly concerned about the incoherent fit between the Reaganite rhetoric of American exceptionalism and the public repudiation of Carter's human rights legacy. The strategy then became to harmonize the two by conflating the defence of human rights with the promotion of a narrow, regimented form of democracy.⁴³

According to neoconservatives, democracy is 'the formation of a political elite in the competitive struggle for the votes of a mainly passive electorate'.⁴⁴ Hence, 'a country is democratic if it grants its people the right to choose their own government through periodic, secret-ballot, multi-party elections, on the basis of universal and equal adult suffrage'.⁴⁵ As Seymour Martin Lipset and Jason Lakin explain, 'this is a minimalist definition of democracy inspired by Joseph Schumpeter's classic elitist conception of democracy as professed in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*'.⁴⁶

Although this is rarely acknowledged in the American political science literature, Schumpeter's elitist theory of democracy is a legacy of the authoritarian intellectual milieu of interwar Europe. It is heavily influenced by the political theory of frustrated liberals and anti-liberals such as Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, George Sorel and, not least, Carl Schmitt, who was a close colleague of Schumpeter at the University of Bonn during the 1920s.⁴⁷ In *Capitalism*, Schumpeter argued that the socio-cultural homogeneity assumed by the classical model of democracy had been undermined by the complexity and heterogeneous nature of advanced industrial societies. He argued that in such conditions, the only kind of democratic consensus that can realistically be envisaged is one fashioned from above by the ruling elite through propaganda and the manipulation of public opinion. This process is then legitimized through some sort of popular mandate achieved through the manufacture rather than the execution of the general will.⁴⁸ Thus, whereas Carl Schmitt had famously sought to redefine democracy as that institutional arrangement by which the masses have the opportunity of either accepting or rejecting the policies proposed by their rulers, Schumpeter redefined democracy as that institutional mechanism by which 'the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them'.⁴⁹ As William Scheuerman noted, to a large extent, 'Schumpeter's "democratic elitism" simply reformed an onerous tradition of Central European authoritarianism in order to make it more palatable to an American audience. Whitewashed of its more openly antidemocratic rhetorical flourishes, Schumpeter's contribution to this tradition proved an attractive starting point for historically and philosophically naïve political scientists seeking an "empirical" alternative to the classics of normative theory'.⁵⁰

Schumpeter's theory of democratic elitism was first introduced and adapted to the American political context in the mid-1950s and early 1960s by prominent American political scientists such as Robert Dahl, Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba, Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarfeld and William McPhee.⁵¹ Today, this neo-Schumpeterian model often goes under the name of 'polyarchy'. Dahl first used the term 'polyarchy' in the early 1970s to distinguish from a more utopian form of democracy, 'one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being or almost completely responsive to all its citizens'.⁵² The concept was subsequently developed and elaborated upon during the following decades by Seymour Martin Lipset, Samuel Huntington, Larry Diamond, Marc Plattner, Juan Linz, Alfred Stepan, Adam Przeworski and other neoconservative and liberal democratization experts affiliated with the NED since its creation in 1983.⁵³

Like the Schumpeterian model from which it takes its cue, the neoconservative interpretation of democracy turns the notion of representative democracy on its head. For the purpose of polyarchic elections is not to select representatives that will execute the policy choices and preferences of the voters, but to authorize rulers to decide on the content of policies and legislation.⁵⁴ As William Robinson argued in his extensive research on the subject, 'by limiting the focus to political contestation among elites through procedurally free elections, polyarchy renders such issues as who controls the material and cultural resources of society, as well as asymmetries and inequalities, both among groups within a single nation and among nations within the international order, become extraneous to the discussion of democracy'.⁵⁵ Indeed, aside from its elitist character, the other particularity of the polyarchic model is that it sees no inconsistency in democratic processes characterized by pronounced socio-economic inequality. In Lipset and Lakin's words, democracy 'is a system that by definition guarantees no redistribution of wealth, but it does separate wealth from power, by giving votes (political power) to those who do not have wealth...'.⁵⁶ According to polyarchists, the separation of the economic sphere from issues of governmental structure eliminates unrealistic normative expectations from the definition of democracy and therefore makes the study of democratization processes more reliable and relevant for policy-making. As Larry Diamond explains in a widely circulated 1997 study, 'the incorporation of social and economic desiderata into the definition of democracy—an approach fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s—has waned considerably in the past two decades. By and large, most scholarly and policy uses of the term democracy today refer to a purely political conception of the term, and this intellectual shift back to an earlier convention has greatly facilitated progress in studying the dynamics of democracy...'.⁵⁷

Now despite what polyarchists are telling us, we should be clear here that the hegemonization of this 'working definition' is by no means a mere issue of academic modelling. If democratization is to be seen as a progressive political development, it must be an inclusive, transformative process geared towards the alleviation of socio-economic, political and cultural factors that prevent equal access to the policy-making process. It may very well be that polyarchy does formally 'separate wealth from power' by giving one vote to those who do not

have wealth. But in reality, socio-economic inequality invariably tends to translate into political inequality. As Dahl himself acknowledged in a 1985 publication, 'Ownership and control contribute to the creation of great differences among citizens in wealth, income, status, skills, information, control over information and propaganda, access to political power... differences like these help in turn to generate significant inequalities among citizens in their capacities and opportunities for participating as political equals in governing the state'.⁵⁸

The important point here is that the political subject envisaged by this elitist conception of democracy has little to do with the reflexive and autonomous republican citizen whose engagement in the process of collective will formation underwrites the Kantian liberal peace. Neoconservatives envisage democracy promotion as the establishment by force of a set of institutions and electoral mechanisms designed to transform the 'deficient' political culture of the targeted states and manufacture consent from above for an externally imposed neoliberal political-economic infrastructure.⁵⁹ In this Straussian–Schumpeterian framework, democratic institutions are not seen as regulating arenas for power competition that may be restructured from the bottom-up as the competing groups see fit. Rather, they are top-down socializing mechanisms designed to generate new forms of political subjectivities and confer a new political character to individual citizens with little concern for the political legitimacy of the new regime among the indigenous population. The limits of such an approach have been exposed in a most dramatic manner in Iraq. Olivier Roy has well captured the nature of the problem:

By attributing the problems of the Middle East to cultural and societal blockages, which one should ignore or circumvent to democratise the region, those discourses casually evacuate the political dimension of those problems—especially all that is related to US foreign policy (resentment created by US domination of the region and American passivity in the Israel–Palestine conflict). But more than anything else, such discourses forget that there can be no democracy without legitimacy. And political legitimacy supposes that actors are firmly grounded in history, traditions and in the general social fabrics of a country.... The fundamental issue has to do with the political legitimacy of the actors suddenly put forth to incarnate this new democracy.... [T]hey are most of the time perceived either like businessmen of a new type, or like the 'agents of American and Zionist imperialism'.... In effect, Washington's politics of democratisation has opened up the political space and allowed various political forces to express themselves and gain political force by drawing on the two main pillars of political legitimacy in the Middle East: nationalism and Islam.⁶⁰

What is more, unlike neo-Kantian scholars and practitioners, neoconservatives do not see democracy promotion as part of a broader scheme geared towards the constitutionalization of the global liberal order.⁶¹ Democracy promotion here is an identity-conferring strategy of statecraft designed to make the international system safe for American hegemony in a world that is and will always be characterized by war, violence and geopolitical rivalry. As Richard Perle explained in a 2008 Iraq symposium in Fukuyama's *The American Interest*:

Contrary to the view of many critics of the war, we did not go into Iraq *mainly* to impose democracy by force in some grand, ambitious (and naive) scheme to transform Iraq and then

the region as a whole into a collection of happy democracies . . . There is a larger picture with respect to Iraq . . . We have demonstrated in Iraq that we will act to protect ourselves. We have shown that we will fight terrorists where we find them, even when the cost is high. We, and now much of the world, have begun to take terrorism seriously. This is in good measure because we have been willing, in Iraq and Afghanistan, to go beyond the instruments of law enforcement and plaintive pleas of ineffective international institutions on which we relied. We have, as the always wise Fouad Ajami put it, created, 'from Egypt to Kuwait and Bahrain, a Pax Americana [that] anchors the order of the region. In Iraq, the Pax Americana, hitherto based in Sunni Arab lands, has acquired a new footing in a Shiite-led country'.⁶²

The 'will to freedom'?

So what should we make of neoconservative commitments to the Enlightenment discourse of freedom, democracy and human rights in the light of the above analysis? According to neoconservatives, their aversion for multilateralism and international institutions is the expression of a distinctively American and more assertive liberalism. This, neoconservatives tell us, is a progressive liberalism of substance rather than a timid liberalism of procedures. A liberalism that does not let its belief in human rights and universal values be naively constrained by a relativistic regime of international law which grants equal status to all states irrespective of regime types. As Robert Kagan explains:

The problem is that the modern liberal vision of progress in international affairs has always been bifocal. On the one hand, liberalism has entertained since the Enlightenment a vision of world peace based on an ever-strengthening international legal system. The success of such a system rests on the recognition that all nations, big or small, democratic or tyrannical, humane or barbarous, are equal sovereign entities. On the other hand, modern liberalism cherishes the rights and liberties of the individual and defines progress as the greater protection of these rights and liberties across the globe. In the absence of a sudden global democratic and liberal transformation, that goal can be achieved only by compelling tyrannical or barbarous regimes to behave more humanely, sometimes through force. Given the tension between these two aspirations, what constitutes international legitimacy will inevitably be a matter of dispute within the liberal world. This is a problem for all liberals.⁶³

Yet one does not have to look very far to find evidence of the false universalist pretence of neoconservative internationalism. Consider Kagan's own bestseller, *Of Paradise and Power* (2003), for example. After having reprimanded Europeans for not being true to their commitments to the universal ethics of liberalism when invoking international law to constrain America's *mission civilisatrice*, Kagan explains that

[a]ny 'rules-based' international order must apply the same sets of rules to different situations. Otherwise we return to a world where nations individually or in groups decide for themselves when a war is and is not justified, guided by their own morality and sense of justice and order. In fact that is the world we live in, and the only world we have ever lived in. It is a world where those with power, believing they have right on their side, impose their sense of justice on others.⁶⁴

According to Kagan, appeals to law and morality in global politics are the *natural* manifestation of a will to power that lacks other means to play the geopolitical game: 'Those who favor security through international law and institutions will constantly downplay the world's irrationality and brutality.'⁶⁵ Drawing on Thucydides and a Nietzschean psychology of power (or a Nietzschean reading of Thucydides?), Kagan argues that a nation's strategic culture is shaped by its geopolitical condition. Thus, whereas a militarily powerful nation like the US will not hesitate to use force to pursue its national interest, military weak states will pursue their national interests by invoking the sanctity of international law and multilateral diplomacy: 'Their tactics, like their goal, are the tactics of the weak. They hope to constrain American power without wielding power themselves. In what may be the ultimate feat of subtlety and indirection, they want to control the behemoth by appealing to its conscience.' Europe's Kantian position thus distorts *reality* to justify a foreign policy dictated not by progressive ethical concerns but by its weakness relative to the US. According to Kagan, these are the 'natural consequences of the transatlantic power gap.'⁶⁶ Peter Berkowitz sees this same natural will to power at work in Europe's insistence on the norm of sovereign existential equality underwriting the international legal order:

The experience of equality fosters resentment of those who are stronger and more prosperous. This, as Nietzsche argued in his career-long polemic against equality, is where things get ugly . . . When resentment takes hold, the appeal to individual rights can serve as a vehicle for the unconscious as well as the calculated and cynical bid to power. Many of the wayward passions stirred up by equality are at work in Europe's ambition to portray international law and international institutions as the comprehensive means for securing global order.⁶⁷

Needless to say, the Nietzschean doctrine of the will to power has little to do with the Enlightenment legacy that neoconservatives claim for themselves in foreign affairs. In order to fully appreciate what is really at stake in these Nietzschean tropes, it is important to briefly remind ourselves of the basic premises of this realist appropriation of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche's controversial doctrine of the will to power found its way into the jargon of 20th-century realism in various forms through the writings of prominent German theorists associated with the realist school such as Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, Reinhold Niebuhr (his parents were German immigrants), Hans Morgenthau and, of course, Leo Strauss.⁶⁸ The conservative and 'realist' dimension of Nietzsche's otherwise complex and multifaceted doctrine has to do with the claim that "'Exploitation" does not pertain to a corrupt or imperfect or primitive society: it pertains to the essence of the living thing as a fundamental organic function, it is a consequence of the intrinsic will to power which is precisely the will of life'.⁶⁹ Or as Morgenthau put it, the lust for power (*Lustprinzip*) is 'inseparable from social life itself'. It is a 'constitutive element of all human associations, from the family through fraternal and professional associations and local political organizations to the state'.⁷⁰ Crucially, the organic drives that ground the will to power are by no means limited to, or determined by,

a mere desire for self-preservation. As Nietzsche argued, 'Physiologists should think again before postulating the drive for self-preservation as the cardinal drive in an organic being. A living thing desires above all to vent its strength—life as such is will to power —: self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent consequences of it'.⁷¹ Thus, power here is sought not only in utilitarian terms as a means for self-preservation but also, and more fundamentally, as a means for self-creation, self-overcoming and self-assertion over others. Will to power is a doctrine of inevitable conflict that presupposes the ineluctable presence of counter-forces, obstacles, undesirable others and 'monsters to destroy': 'will to power can manifest itself only against resistances; therefore it seeks that which resists it'.⁷²

The will to power is a thoroughly tragic doctrine. It reminds us with unsettling lucidity that human existence is constituted by merciless forces and negative constraints—suffering, pain, death, loss, struggle—that impose limits on our highest moral aspirations and that can only be endured if one accepts the determinant impact of those forces on the human condition. As Morgenthau explains in the opening pages of *Politics Among Nations*, 'The world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces inherent in human nature. To improve the world one must work with those forces, not against them. This being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realized...'.⁷³ The will to power is therefore a negation of the Kantian notion of the 'free will' underpinning Enlightenment narratives of progress. As Nietzsche argued, the notion of a will that is free in the sense that it is not caused by something prior to itself is an intellectual error that was engineered by the monotheistic religions to render man accountable to a transcendent god. Like everything in this modern godless world, the human will is caught in a chain of causality; if the will appears to be free and events often appear to be random it is only because we cannot grasp the causal chain of events behind them. The will to power is a will that is not free but that is driven by unconscious psychological impulses.⁷⁴ It rests on a set of productive tensions between nature, culture and meaning that drives the historical process in perpetual cycles of energetic growth and decay rather than in a teleological manner. As Lawrence Hatab explains:

Nature by itself is raw will to power, the ongoing struggle between opposing life forces in the unending cycle of victory and defeat, life and death. By itself, nature has no 'meaning,' no purpose or value in its blind instinctive energies. Yet out of nature there emerges the human ability to form meaning and value in its cultural capacity to exceed the sheer immediacy of instinct, which by way of language is able to develop a reflective sense of time and thus create values that inform the present with past inheritances and future goals.⁷⁵

The will to power thus sees culture and civilization as being born out of, and transformative of, natural forces. Although culture—i.e. norms, traditions, law, institutions—can redirect the struggle for power into socially acceptable channels and contain its violent and destructive potential, nature and the 'evils of power' remain determinant of the fate of even the most 'civilized' societies. For the will

to power is itself the main drive behind the civilizing process. From this perspective, the modern nation-state, which has historically been shaped and constituted not only by the recurrence of war but also by the constant preparation of modern societies for the act of war, is not an emancipation from the state of nature but a collectivization and external projection of the private lust for power onto the international arena. As Ned Lebow explains in his study of Morgenthau, 'The power of the state feeds on itself through a process of psychological transference. Impulses constrained by ethics and law are mobilized by the state for its own ends. By transferring their egotism to the nation, people gain vicarious release for their otherwise repressed impulses. What was formerly egotism, and ignoble and immoral, now became patriotism, and noble and altruistic'.⁷⁶ Thus, just as state power grows when external counter-forces intensify, civil society decays and relapses towards the war of all against all when those counter-forces recede. Or as Leo Strauss puts it in his critique of the liberal state: 'Liberalism, sheltered by and engrossed in a world of culture, forgets the foundations of culture, the state of nature, that is, human nature in its dangerousness and endangeredness.'⁷⁷

This is where will to power and the realist doctrine of reason of state meet. As Reinhart Koselleck explains in *Critique and Crisis*, the rational need to found a state to render the will to power tolerable for individuals by projecting it onto the international arena removes all differences that exist between morality and politics. It transforms 'the moral alternative of good and evil into the political alternative of peace and war'.⁷⁸ In this Hobbesian universe, reason 'creates a neutral zone of State "technology" in which there is no law but the prince's will. In such a State only the formal legality of the laws is rational, not their content; therefore the political commandment of political morality to obey the laws regardless of their content is reasonable.'⁷⁹

Now, from a neoconservative perspective, the problem with this subordination of moral reason to political reason is that it is unsustainable in a modern liberal polity whose national identity and historical experience have been so significantly shaped by the progressive discourse of the Enlightenment. As Kristol grudgingly reminds us, it was precisely against the immorality of a world governed by political reason that the Enlightenment defined itself and that its agents, under the spell of modern rationalism, reversed the Platonic subordination of utopia to reality.⁸⁰ From this perspective, the will to power is a negation of the American experience that can only lead down the same nihilistic path as the progressive illusions against which realism has constructed its own narrative. For, nihilism is the incapacity to accept conflict, suffering and the tragic conclusion that life has no final purpose or moral goal. It is the incapacity to find value and meaning in the immanence of life. Historically, the experience of nihilism stems from the fact that Western civilization has always judged conditions of becoming in the world to be deficient, fallen, alien or base and thus has sought to address these shortcomings in favour of redemptive spiritual, rational or moralistic value traditions that locate the meaning of human existence either in the after-life, science or the rationality of the historical process. Today, the devaluation of Christianity and scientific rationalism is experienced as nihilistic because these traditions are still assumed to be our only

measures of meaning, truth and valuation.⁸¹ As Martin Heidegger put it in his study of Nietzsche:

Nihilism moves history in the way of a scarcely recognized fundamental process in the destiny of the Western people. Hence nihilism is not just one historical phenomenon among others, not just one spiritual–intellectual current that occurs within Western history after others have occurred, after Christianity, after humanism, and after the Enlightenment. Nihilism, thought in its essence, is on the contrary the fundamental movement of the history of the West.⁸²

The doctrine of will to power offers no way out of this impasse.⁸³ It offers us a choice between a self-deluding nihilism that refuses to work with the merciless forces of nature on the one hand, and its own naturalistic and equally nihilistic interpretation of the world as a universal and purposeless struggle for power on the other. As James Porter noted, the will to power, ‘with its delusions of uninhibited power and agency untrammelled by the constraints and illusions of subjectivity’, is both a critique and a symptom of this tragic reading of the history of Western metaphysics. It is a ‘genealogy of the modern subject and its fascination with the one trait it absolutely lacks: power’.⁸⁴

Neoconservative thought is caught in this nihilistic double bind. It lives by an absolutist politics of sovereignty and reason of state that has been deprived of normative justification by Enlightenment criticism. But it talks the language of freedom, self-determination and human rights to mobilize an anomic and hedonistic civil society for the causes of nationalism and empire.⁸⁵ As Krauthammer explains:

Realism is a valuable antidote to the woolly internationalism of the 1990s. But realism can only take you so far. Its basic problem lies in its definition of national interest as classically offered by its great theorist, Hans Morgenthau: interest defined as power. Morgenthau postulated that what drives nations, what motivates their foreign policy, is the will to power—to keep it and expand it. For most Americans, will to power might be a correct description of the world—of what motivates other countries—but it cannot be a prescription for America. It cannot be our purpose Democratic globalism sees as the engine of history not the will to power but the will to freedom Beyond interest defined as power . . . expansive and utopian . . . [yet sharing] realism’s insights about the centrality of power . . . [and] having appropriate contempt for the fictional legalism of liberal internationalism The rationality of the enemy is something beyond our control. But the use of our power is within our control. And if that power is used wisely, constrained not by illusions and fictions but only by the limits of our mission—which is to bring a modicum of freedom as an antidote to nihilism—we can prevail.⁸⁶

Yet as Krauthammer and his colleagues know all too well, the ‘will to freedom’, like the ‘balance of power that favors freedom’ promised by the US National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2002 does not mean anything. The will to power is a will that is not free. Whereas freedom as such cannot be balanced, power balancing is the natural and inevitable destiny of the international system of states.⁸⁷

Further insights into this nihilistic *Realpolitik* can be drawn from an important article that Irving Kristol wrote for the *Weekly Standard* in the aftermath of the

Iraq War in August 2003. There, Kristol describes what he considers to be the four main tenets of neoconservative foreign policy thinking:

- (1) Statesmen should, above all, have the ability to distinguish friends from enemies.
- (2) Patriotism is a natural and healthy sentiment and should be encouraged by both private and public institutions.
- (3) World government is a terrible idea since it can lead to world tyranny. International institutions that point to an ultimate world government should be regarded with the deepest suspicion.
- (4) For a great power, the 'national interest' is not a geographical term, except for fairly prosaic matters like trade and environmental regulation. A smaller nation might appropriately feel that its national interest begins and ends at its borders, so that its foreign policy is almost always in a defensive mode. A larger nation has more extensive interests. And large nations, whose identity is ideological, like the Soviet Union of yesteryear and the US of today, inevitably have ideological interests in addition to more material concerns.

Typically, Kristol does not give details nor justify the thinking that lies behind those basic principles. Yet he gives away an important clue as he informs his readers that 'the favorite neoconservative text on foreign affairs, thanks to professors Leo Strauss of Chicago and Donald Kagan of Yale, is Thucydides on the Peloponnesian War'.⁸⁸ Again here, Kristol does not explain what it is that attracts neoconservatives to this particular reading of Thucydides. But as we follow his lead and thrall through the Straussian literature on Thucydides, what we find is a fascinating neo-Nietzschean reading of the Peloponnesian War that differs a great deal from the interpretation of Thucydides that predominates in the international relations (IR) literature.⁸⁹

Sure enough, Strauss's Thucydides sees through Sparta's idealistic claim that it is fighting for justice and the liberation of Greece rather than its own self-interest. He also derides Spartan beliefs that gods and divine justice have anything to do with the outcome of battles and the meaning of human history. For, as the 'realist' Athenians put it to their 'idealist' Spartan enemies, it would be unreasonable and unjust for the gods to either reward or punish human beings for giving in to their immutable nature and pursuing what they hold to be in their self-interest. Thucydides the Athenian is therefore serenely resigned to the irredeemably dominating character of human nature and the weakness of justice among nations. But he is also aware of the unbearable psychological costs that such unpleasant truths impose on the polity and therefore dissents from the Athenian thesis that morality has no place in international politics altogether.⁹⁰ For a nation that lives by the wisdom of Athens cannot blame and resent its enemies for unjustly pursuing what they hold to be their self-interest any more than it can blame itself for pursuing ignoble imperialist policies. The political world of the Athenians is one in which the will to power of nations clash with one another in a godless

moral vacuum. This means that the nation living by the realism of Athens must abandon all its claims to nobility, moral exceptionalism and manifest destiny. This is a requirement that no political community—especially not America—can embrace without seriously undermining its foundations. As Robert Kagan puts it, there is ‘something about realism that runs directly counter to the fundamental principles of American society . . . if the United States is founded upon universal principles, how can Americans practice amoral indifference when those principles are under siege around the world? And if they do profess indifference, how can they manage to avoid the implication that their principles are not, in fact, universal?’⁹¹

The Straussian reading of the Peloponnesian Wars teaches us that the imperialist Athenians could not live according to their own ‘unrealistic realism’, as they ultimately failed to completely free themselves of moral shame and religious anxiety. After the mysterious and profane mutilation of the statues of Hermes throughout the city on the eve of the departure for the Sicilian expedition, the Athenians began to fear that the gods disapproved of their savage slaughter of the Melians. They interpreted the religious crime as a sign sent by the gods in disapproval of their ruthless imperialist policies. This led to a zealous and politically dividing attempt to arrest and execute not only those suspected of having committed the religious crimes but also anyone suspected of impiety, in an effort to appease the gods and win back their support for future expeditions. It also led to the arrest of the impious but militarily accomplished General Alcibiades who was meant to lead the Sicilian expedition. The expedition was subsequently entrusted to the pious but less capable General Nicias. Nicias’s incompetence and his fear of the gods ultimately cost Athens both the conquest of Sicily and the war against Sparta.

The lesson of this narrative is that moral and religious passions may be unreasonable, but as they are irreducible features of human existence, they have an important impact on the conduct of international politics. No statesman can do away with the constraints that *perceptions* of justice and injustice impose on the pursuit of the national interest. Thus, against realists, the Straussian Thucydides holds that state power cannot be measured in narrow materialist terms since the capacity of a state to achieve its objective is contingent on the moral authority that it is able to exercise. However, and this is crucial, this moral authority is purely self-referential and self-interested: ‘such authority is important for the state above all as a way of buttressing its *own* hopes for cosmic and divine support rather than as a way of gaining the consent of its allies or subjects.’⁹²

In this interpretation, the need of the political community to transcend its own material self-interest is the one universal rational truth transcending the clash between irreconcilable conceptions of justice in international relations. It is this ‘natural’ truth which links the universal with the particular and drives the historical process forward. For Strauss’s Thucydides, the fact that men always seek to transcend their self-interests through competing religious and moral discourses points towards the existence of a universal good higher than the Nietzschean will to power and domination. This higher good is the pursuit of trans-historical knowledge about the nature of political and human life.

In other words, the universally good life is the trans-political and trans-civic life of the philosopher who understands and accepts with serenity that life has no intrinsic meaning beyond the earthly demands of citizenship and politics.⁹³

The full implications of this peculiar neo-Nietzschean realism are best appreciated when contrasted with the modern, 'liberal' realism that predominates in the international relations literature. Modern realism, in both its classical and neorealist variants, holds that, even though all states are convinced that their national interest reflects the moral principles institutionalized in their political regime, their real and ultimate objective is the pursuit of power understood in predominantly materialist terms. In contrast with the realism of Strauss and his followers, modern realism is based on a strict positivist rejection of the perspective of the engaged actor and hermeneutic conceptions of justice. Modern realism, in other words, hinges on a professed 'value-neutral' and morally relativistic approach to the study of politics. According to Morgenthau for instance, because no human being can affirm the rational truth of any universal moral principle, the idea of justice among states makes no sense: 'To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations is quite another.' For Morgenthau, talks of justice in international relations simply mean the imposition of the strongest nation's conception of the good over that of weaker nations. Thus, by defining interest in terms of material power, Morgenthau hopes to create a 'science of international politics' that analytically sees through the moral claims of states and prescriptively 'saves us from the moral excesses and political follies' of ideologically driven diplomacy.⁹⁴

As Michael Williams argues, Morgenthau's 'science of politics' was an intellectual strategy of limits that sought to provide a more reliable—more realistic—basis for the maintenance of the post-war liberal order.⁹⁵ His positivism, of course, is not 'value-neutral'. It rests upon strong normative commitments to the preservation of human life and the nation as a political and cultural entity. It is also based on a set of rationally indemonstrable anthropological and metaphysical assumptions about the selfish, self-preserving and dominating character of human nature. Morgenthau's classical realism is liberal in the sense that it follows Hobbes in his intent to institute a procedural and 'value-neutral' peace that will render the struggle for power tolerable and allow for the preservation of individual human life.⁹⁶ From the relativity of justice in world politics, and from the 'natural' primacy of power and self-interest in relations among human beings and nations, Morgenthau infers a rational natural law commanding that state power be deployed in pursuit of peace, security and 'the moral principle of national survival'.⁹⁷ Morgenthau believed that human nature cannot be changed and that power politics will always be a permanent feature of the human condition. However, he believed that the most destructive effects of power politics could be eliminated by deploying a positivist theory of IR that proposes power, fear of death, and the elimination of ideology and vainglory from diplomatic discourses as the best means to preserve human life and civilization. Unsurprisingly, this typically Hobbesian strategy eventually led him to make the case for the

abandonment of nationalist principles in favour of the establishment of a global leviathan that would hold humanity in check with its monopoly on weapons of mass destruction. For him, this was the only viable means to avoid the destruction of human societies through nuclear war:

The experience of two world wars within a quarter of a century and the prospects of a third one to be fought with nuclear weapons have imparted to the idea of a world state an unprecedented urgency. What is needed...is not limitation of the exercise of national sovereignty through international obligations and institutions, but the transference of the sovereignties of individual nations to a world authority, which would be as sovereign over the individual nations as the individual nations are sovereign within their respective territories.⁹⁸

From a Straussian-neoconservative perspective, the scenario envisaged by Morgenthau is conceptually inconsistent. For, Morgenthau's realism is an 'unrealistic' theoretical construct designed to recast the 'natural'—and therefore 'realistic'—struggle for justice and vainglory that he himself diagnoses (and in which actors *actually* perceive themselves to be engaged) into an abstract struggle for survival, power and peace free of identity-conferring ideology, moralism and utopia. This positivist conceptual move then leads him to assume, not unlike advocates of global liberal governance today, that nations will want to preserve their *physical* existence even at the cost of their autonomy and *cultural* existence.⁹⁹ It presupposes that human beings will sacrifice the ideals, beliefs and values that constitute their identity and humanize their lives for the sake of 'perpetual peace' irrespective of the intellectual, spiritual and ethical substance of that peace. Yet, if one accepts Morgenthau's own interpretation of human nature and the will to power, it is more likely that his world state would be a tyranny permanently at war with those dissatisfied with its normative content.¹⁰⁰ Thus, while accepting the basic anthropological premises of Morgenthau's realism, they reject its ethical prescriptions. For neoconservatives, a life worth living—a life free from political tyranny—is unthinkable without the permanent possibility of a nuclear conflict. As Pangle and Ahrens Dorf argue, 'Civilization can survive only if there are human beings who are willing to risk death, and even nuclear death, in order to defend that ideal against tyranny'.¹⁰¹

The neoconservative 'way of life'

According to neoconservatives, it is this unconditional commitment to the communal notion of the good that humanizes and gives meaning to the life of the individual citizen. Without this commitment, life is mere animal existence, without context or history. And it is the absence of this existential commitment that renders liberal societies so vulnerable to their enemies today. As Kristol argues, the liberal state 'defines the common good as consisting mainly of personal security under the law, personal liberty under the law, and a steadily increasing material prosperity for those who apply themselves to that end. It is, by the standards of previous civilizations, a "vulgar" conception of the common good:

There is no high nobility of purpose, no selfless devotion to transcendental ends, no awe-inspiring heroism.¹⁰² This is what he called the 'The Lost Soul of the Welfare State': 'Readiness to die for one's country is regarded as a form of psychological "extremism", and it is to discourage such mental unbalance that the modern welfare state has practically abolished military parades'.¹⁰³ For neoconservatives, this communitarian political existentialism is not a celebration of war as such but an abandonment of the status quo that allows atomized citizens to transcend their individuality. War, as Pangle explains, is 'a source of renewal of high purpose, of exemplary civic spirit and thoughtful reflection, of citizen engagement and even participation. All this implies that even foreign and defense policy needs to be viewed in terms not only of defense, and of benefits to others, but also—if only secondarily—in terms of the moral effects on domestic political life'.¹⁰⁴ Fukuyama concurs: 'A liberal democracy that could fight a short and decisive war every generation or so to defend its own liberty and independence would be far healthier and more satisfied than one that experienced nothing but continuous peace'.¹⁰⁵

The upshot of this atavistic conception of ethical freedom is that it requires an enemy foil to bring itself into relief. This is why after the end of the Cold War neoconservatives were not so comfortable with the world they believe to have 'won' for themselves. As Fukuyama concluded at the end of his famous treatise, the 'end of history' and the ensuing neoliberal peace marked the beginning of 'sad and austere times': 'the struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands'.¹⁰⁶ Fukuyama's intellectual mentors concurred:

The enemy protected us from too much depression on ourselves. The global nature of the conflicts we were engaged in imposed an unprecedented uniformity on the world. It has been liberalism—or else.... Now, however, all bets are off. The glance back towards ourselves... is likely to be not entirely satisfying.

—Allan Bloom¹⁰⁷

With the end of the Cold War, what we really need is an obvious ideological and threatening enemy, one worthy of our mettle, one that can unite us in opposition. Isn't that what the most successful movie of the year, 'Independence Day,' is telling us? Where are our aliens when we most need them?

—Irving Kristol¹⁰⁸

Americans have constructed their creedal identity in contrast to an undesirable 'other'.... If there is no evil empire out there threatening those principles, what indeed does it mean to be an American?

—Samuel Huntington¹⁰⁹

And it is, of course, on the basis of this same atavistic ethos of struggle that neoconservatives have greeted the events of 9/11 with such opportunistic fervour.

As Norman Podhoretz put it in the *Weekly Standard* a month after the attacks, Al Qaeda brought a new myth of struggle into being that would save the American republic from cultural disintegration and moral decadence:

More than just revenge, Americans crave a 'new birth' of the confidence we used to have in ourselves and in 'America the beautiful'. If we go on dithering, our lives will remain at permanent risk. So, too, will something deeper than the desire for physical security that has been stirred and agitated by the ferocious wound we received on September 11: a wound that is still suppurating and sore for lack of the healing balm that only a more coherent and wholehearted approach to the war will bring. What I mean is that nothing less than the soul of this country is at stake, and that nothing less than an unambiguous victory will save us from yet another disappointment in ourselves and another despairing disillusion with our leaders. Only this time the disappointment and the despair might well possess enough force to topple us over just as surely as those hijacked planes did to the twin towers of the World Trade Center.¹¹⁰

Needless to say, this militaristic political existentialism constitutes a radical negation of liberal Enlightenment philosophy. For it relieves men from the burden of independent critical reflection by establishing the identity between individual freedom and obligation to the state.¹¹¹ In this framework, it is the executive decision on the existential distinction between friend and enemy that gives normative substance to the 'political way of life' that is thought to 'humanize' the life of the atomized individual. And this decision, of course, is simply beyond the realm of normative justification. As Carl Schmitt insisted in his famous treatise on *The Concept of the Political*, from the point of view of the state the justification for demanding that men sacrifice their own lives to defend the political community in times of national emergency is outside the bound of discursive rationalization: 'There is no rational end, no norm however correct, no program however exemplary, no social ideal however beautiful, and no legitimacy or legality that could justify men's killing one another.'¹¹² The only justification is the mere fact of an extreme existential situation. And since the existential realm is normatively self-referential, there is absolutely no rational standpoint from which to determine what counts as an existential condition and from which to question the ethicality of political authority. Hence, in reality, far from humanizing and historicizing 'mere life', the intense moments of collective subjectivity cultivated by this existentialist ethics in fact only sublimate the political and socio-economic contradictions that define the true historicity of socially formed selves, while putting the foundation of political authority beyond all social and historical facticity.¹¹³

In sum, neoconservatism is an idealist attack on the weak and naive idealist alienated from the world. Instead, it proposes a heroic idealism of struggle and sacrifice geared towards the *transformation* (not conservation) of America's bourgeois society into a post-welfare community of values within the existing class structure by reforming the relationship between the individual and the community without interfering with the profit motive of neoliberal capitalism. Neoconservatives are no Nazis. But the discursive strategies and political practices with which they have sought to address what they perceive as the weaknesses

of the American liberal tradition over the years are drawn straight out of the theoretical repertoire of European fascism. Like neoconservatives today, the theorists of fascism—Gentile, Maurras, Sorel, Jünger, Van den Brück, Forsthooff, Sombart, Rosenberg, Schmitt—all sought to reverse the decay of bourgeois society by promising the unity of the nation instead of materialism, individual and group interests, and a soulless liberalism. Myth, symbolism, charismatic leadership and cultural regeneration through war would replace endless public deliberation and compromising parliaments and put an end to divisive class politics. Yet, this extravagant programme of cultural regeneration in fact only served the narrow interests of militarism and imperialism.¹¹⁴ As the historian Hans Mommsen explains, fascist foreign policy was a domestic crisis projected outwards. It ‘was able to conceal [überspielen] the increasing loss of reality only by maintaining political dynamism through incessant action. As such it became ever more distant from the chance of political stabilization’.¹¹⁵

In an analogous manner, neoconservatism can only sustain itself by cultivating a level of limited but endemic conflict in the international system and nurturing its support base in the name of an expansive foreign policy. This is what Emmanuel Todd aptly calls ‘theatrical micromilitarism’.¹¹⁶ Theatrical micromilitarism in Central America during the late 1970s and 1980s provided neoconservatives with long-lasting opportunities to tighten the boundaries of American identity and re-assert the power and prerogatives of the executive branch following the demise of the Nixon presidency, the humiliation of Vietnam and the Iran hostage crisis. This includes ‘the manipulation of intelligence and the media, the building of an interagency war party that operated autonomously from Washington’s foreign policy establishment, the illegal wiretaps, and the surveillance of antiwar activists’.¹¹⁷ During George W. Bush’s ‘neoconservative presidency’, the theatrical micromanagement of the periphery under the banner of the global war on terror has served as a vehicle for the introduction of arbitrary forms of authority, executive prerogatives and legal instruments that hark back to the age of absolutism. These include the destruction of attorney–client confidentiality, secret detentions, and, not least, the claim that the government has a right to detain indefinitely US citizens whom it unilaterally identifies as potential terrorists. Then, there is the refusal to apply the Geneva Conventions to prisoners of war; the use of torture and the disregarding of basic human rights standards in the treatment of terrorist suspects; and the establishment of illegal prisoner camps and military tribunals in Guantanamo Bay in which the military act as interrogators, prosecutors, defence counsel, judges and, when death sentences are proclaimed, as executioners. As Scheuerman noted, ‘That precisely such activities encouraged our Enlightenment predecessors to discard monarchy in the first place seems to have been lost on Republican partisans normally hostile to “big government,” the administration’s cheerleaders at Fox News, and millions of ordinary Americans understandably angered by the 9/11 attacks’.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

It is important that we recognize American neoconservatism for what it is. In his otherwise excellent history of the movement, Justin Vaïsse, director of research in the Brookings Center on the US and Europe, concludes that neoconservatism is a uniquely and thoroughly American ideology. Neoconservatism is conservative in domestic politics but liberal in foreign affairs: 'their Wilsonianism, their moralism, their tendency to disturb the status quo and, out of foreign policy necessity, their defence of a strong state possessing a powerful military apparatus—all of this puts them closer to liberals than conservatives.'¹¹⁹ As I hope this study has demonstrated, this is a naive conclusion that does not capture the dynamics between the domestic and foreign politics of neoconservatism, and that one can only arrive at by completely ignoring the intellectual underpinnings of neoconservative politics. Neoconservatives certainly are moralizing supporters of a strong and expansionist militaristic state. But the worldview, values and objectives that sustain this transformative project have little to do with liberalism—'conservative', 'hawkish' or else. Liberalism is about self-determination, collective security, international institutions, law and the transformation of the international state of anarchy into a global constitutional order of human rights. Neoconservatism is inimical to all this.

Despite what neoconservatives are telling us, human rights, civil liberties, the rule of law and democratic oversight are not luxuries that liberal societies enjoy only in times of normalcy.¹²⁰ They are the very foundational principles that these societies must maintain in times of crisis if they are to remain liberal. In the end, the notion that the societal chaos and metaphysical disenchantment generated by globalization and the forces of liberal modernization can be addressed with Platonic returns to discredited metaphysics, ethnocentric universalisms and the constant replaying of the good friend versus evil enemy dialectic rests on a reductive political psychology that simply mirrors the obscurantism of the fundamentalists with which America has been at war for the past eight years. However successful these political strategies can be in times of uncertainty, they rest on a vulgar misunderstanding of what the human search for transcendence is all about.

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 89. See, for instance, Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 73, pp. 8–9, 38–39; K. Waltz, *Man, The State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 159–160, 210–212; M. Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), Chapter 1; R. Gilpin, 'The richness of the tradition of political realism', *International Organization*, 38/2 (1984), pp. 287–304.
 90. Strauss's main study of Thucydides is in his *The City and Man* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964), Chapter 3. For a sample of some of the most influential Straussian interpretations of Thucydides see D. Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969); *The Archidamian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974); *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1981); *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); D. Bolotin, 'Thucydides', in L. Strauss and J. Cropsey (Eds), *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd edn (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1987); C. Bruell, 'Thucydides' view of Athenian

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91. R. Kagan, 'Inside the Limo', *The New Republic*, 10 April 2000, p. 36.
 92. Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, p. 270 note 39; D. Garst, 'Thucydides and Neorealism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33/1 (1989), p. 22.
 93. Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *ibid.*, pp. 13–32.
 94. Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 73, p. 13.
 95. Williams, *op. cit.*, Ref. 70.
 96. Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 73, pp. 231–232, 491, 498.
 97. Morgenthau, *ibid.*, p. 12.
 98. Morgenthau, *ibid.*, p. 333.
 99. Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, p. 235.
 100. Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, Chapters 7–8; Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, pp. 287–328; I. Kristol, 'Diplomacy vs. foreign policy' in his *On the Democratic Idea in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). In fact, Morgenthau himself admitted so much: 'a world state created by conquest' and ruling over 'an unwilling humanity' would be a 'totalitarian monster resting on feet of clay'. Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 73, p. 344.
 101. Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, p. 237.
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