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'A Balance of Power that Favors Freedom.'  
The Historical and Ideological Roots of the  
Neo-Conservative Persuasion

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**BADIA FIESOLANA, SAN DOMENICO DI FIESOLE (FI)**

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## **Abstract**

The paper offers a genealogy of neoconservatism, concentrating on its ideological and historical foundations in the early 1970s. In the first part, it shows how neoconservatism represented a reaction to the crisis—real and perceived—the United States was undergoing, and an answer Cold War liberalism gave to Kissinger’s realism, to the radicalism of the New Left and to the emerging theories of interdependence. In the second part, the paper examines the influence neoconservatives were able to exert on the foreign policy of George W. Bush, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September the 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. It argues that neoconservatism, as a visionary and utopian form of ‘crisis internationalism’, was ideally fit to dominate post 9/11 U.S. foreign policy discourse. But it underlines also the intrinsic limits and contradictions of the neoconservative project.

## **Keywords**

Exceptionalism, interdependence, morality, neoconservatives, power, realism.

## Introduction

‘A balance of power that favors freedom’. This phrase, indicating the alleged primary aim of post 9/11 U.S. foreign policy, is repeated five times in the September 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (hereinafter NSS). Since then, many important officials of the Bush administration have also used it frequently. Among them, the new Secretary of State and former National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, a scholar who prior to this had impeccable realist credentials, and often criticized America’s missionary zeal and U.S. tendency to misuse the military as an instrument of nation and democracy-building (NSS, 2002; Rice 2000; Rice 2002).

Much less dissected than other rhetorical virtuosités of the 2002 NSS, this sentence encapsulates, in its simplicity, the basic intellectual and political tenets of Neoconservatism. It helps us to understand its ideological foundations; its powerful rhetoric; its strong appeal to different sectors of the American electorate; but also its intrinsic, and ultimately inescapable contradictions.

In the first part of this essay I will try to identify the genealogy of neoconservatism. I will therefore concentrate on its formative period: the 1970s. At the time, neoconservatism aspired to be a response (and a solution) to the crisis the U.S. had undergone in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A solution, however, whose main intellectual and political traits had been defined in opposition to the other political and intellectual responses to that crisis. In the second, shorter part of the essay, I will concentrate instead on recent events and explain why neoconservatives were able to exert a relevant influence on the foreign policy of George W. Bush, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September the 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. By concentrating primarily on its historical and ideological foundations, I will try to illustrate why neoconservatism, as a visionary and utopian form of ‘crisis internationalism’, was ideally fit to dominate post 9/11 U.S. foreign policy discourse.<sup>1</sup>

## Against Realism, Interdependence, and the New Left

Returning to the U.S. after a long trip abroad, which included a stopover in what was then called Leningrad, American realist diplomat and historian George Kennan decided to call National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. It was September 1973. Kissinger, almost at the height of his fame, was about to be appointed Secretary of State. The Watergate drama was unfolding with unexpected rapidity. Détente with the Soviet Union, the keystone of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s grand strategy, was beginning to be excoriated domestically, by an unlikely coalition of conservative republicans and disaffected liberal democrats. The latter were led by senator Henry Jackson (from Washington state) and were soon to be labelled as ‘neoconservatives’ (Brinkley, 1994; Ehrman, 1995; Kaufman, 2000).

One of the main problems Kissinger had to face at the time was an amendment to the 1973 Trade Reform Act, sponsored by Jackson and by senator Charles Vanik (a democrat from Ohio). The Jackson-Vanik amendment tied the granting to the Soviet Union of Most-Favored Nation Status—a crucial element of the set of agreements achieved by Washington and Moscow—to the lifting of restrictions on the emigration of Soviet Jews. The amendment represented an obvious interference in Soviet domestic affairs. Political variables (Jackson’s presidential ambitions and Nixon’s difficulties), traditional anti-Communism, emotional attachment to the state of Israel and genuine concern for the violations of human rights in the USSR and the rest of the Soviet bloc were the main factors behind Jackson’s initiative. Furthermore, the Jackson-Vanik initiative was soon complemented by the neoconservatives’ embracing of the cause of Soviet dissidents, which opened another front of tension with Kissinger (Garthoff, 1994: 453-63; Hanhimäki, 2004: 340-2; Kaufmann, 2004: 242-60).

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<sup>1</sup> On this second aspect I have been influenced by many analyses, the most important of which were Ikenberry, 2004; Leffler, 2003; Leffler, 2004; Robin, 2004.

In his conversation with Kissinger, Kennan thundered against this attempt to influence U.S. foreign policy. According to the verbatim reconstruction left by a stenographer not very well versed in Soviet names, Kennan stressed that ‘nothing as yet has actually happened to either Sofarov [sic] or Soldzamechen [sic]’; on the contrary, the dissidents were troublemakers and ‘many of the issues that they’ had with the Soviet government were ‘simply ones they themselves had provoked’, to the point of splitting ‘the whole Russian intellectual and esthetic [sic] community’. This, according to Kennan, had induced ‘a lot of the most important other Russian intellectuals’ to ‘turn against them’ (‘then’—added Kissinger caustically—‘you know what would have happened to them under Stalin’). Kennan’s bitter conclusion was quintessential realism: ‘I don’t think in any case that it’s right for a great government such as ours to try to adjust its foreign policy in order to work internal changes in another country’.<sup>2</sup>

Non-interference, the separation of domestic politics from foreign policy, national interest: some of the basic elements of a general realist creed were all contained, *in nuce*, in a simple phone call. This creed fit well, although only for a short period, in post-Vietnam U.S. foreign policy. Much appreciated by a majority of Americans, it was an answer to the failure in Vietnam and to the crisis—political, diplomatic, economic, cultural and, in some ways, also of identity—that the country was undergoing. However, the creed and its implicit promise to teach Americans the hard and immutable laws of international politics were about to be severely challenged, and ultimately defeated. The challenge to the alleged realist turn Kissinger had imposed on American foreign policy was led by Cold War liberals, like Jackson and future ambassador at the UN, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and by the new Right about to launch the presidential candidacy of Ronald Reagan.

What was imputed to Kissinger’s realism? And how did this critique contribute to the moulding of a new neoconservative approach to foreign policy and national security? As American Enterprise Institute scholars Tom Donnelly and Vance Serchuk recently put it, for neoconservatives ‘realism’ has always been ‘deeply at odds with both American political principles and American national interests’; it reflects ‘a dogmatic, inflexible, even reactionary ideology’ that ‘stand[s] opposed to the great liberal tradition of American strategic culture’. Such tradition, oddly enough, would include ‘Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush’ (Donnelly and Serchuk, 2004a; Donnelly and Serchuk, 2004b).<sup>3</sup>

In the 1970s, the target of the attack was obviously détente, the historical anomaly that Donnelly and Serchuk implicitly refer to. Collaboration with the Soviet Union was condemned from a strategic and moral perspective. Strategically, Jackson and others strongly denounced the Salt agreements on the limitation of nuclear weapons. Many of these criticisms concentrated on the various technical flaws of the first Salt treaty. The limits the treaty posed to the amount of U.S. offensive weapons were denounced as conferring on the Soviets a *de facto* condition of nuclear advantage. It was claimed that the negotiations were exploited by the Soviet Union to achieve a condition of superiority that would pay a high political dividend. From this perspective, as historian Dana Allin has pointed out, neoconservatism offered from the beginning ‘a distinct world view, in particular, a pronounced pessimism about the Soviet threat’ (Allin, 1995, 54).

More important, nuclear equivalence with the Soviet Union was unacceptable because its corollary could be (and should be, in strict realist terms) that the two superpowers were also morally equivalent. It was in these years—Donnelly and Serchuk maintain—that “moral equivalence” between East and West slipped into the mainstream of U.S. strategic thought, and so a critique advanced by left-wing dissenters during the Vietnam years was adopted by a right-wing administration in the White House’

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2 Telephone Call George Kennan/Henry Kissinger, September 14, 1973, 8.55 pm, National Archives and Records Administration (hereinafter NARA), Nixon Presidential Material Project (hereinafter NPMP), Henry A. Kissinger Telephone Conversations Transcripts (hereinafter Telcons), Chronological File, Box 22.

3 In the pantheon of pre neoconservatives suggested by the two authors is surprisingly missing Harry Truman, to whom many neocons continue instead to revere. The absence of militarily, fiscally and socially conservative Dwight Eisenhower, and that of traditional conservative George Bush Sr. is instead emblematic.

(Donnelly and Serchuk, 2004a). Simply negotiating with the Soviet Union meant granting the communist superpower a *de facto* recognition of legitimacy. At the same time, not supporting Soviet dissidents represented a moral abdication on the part of the United States: the only country to date capable of standing up to the Soviet ideological and civilizational challenge. Détente was, in the end, a form of self-defeating neo-appeasement, which placed the U.S. in grave danger, just as it did with Britain in the 1930s: as sympathetic biographer Robert Kaufman wrote, 'Jackson's admirers and the senator himself saw a parallel between his relentless campaign against détente during the 1970s and Winston Churchill's campaign against appeasement during the 1930s' (Kaufman, 2000, 243).

This explains the longing of many neoconservatives for the re-launching of the dichotomies of Cold War discourse, and for the clarity they provided. And, along with these, for the reaffirmation of the faith in the moral potential of U.S. power. The first objective thus became to dismantle the idea there could be any form of equivalence between the United States and the Soviet Union (and, indeed, between the United States and the rest of the world). To achieve this goal it was necessary to tackle what was considered the basic precondition of the Faustian deal that the U.S. was imprudently accepting: the belief that strategic interdependence was inescapable and perennial, and that America's 'quest for absolute security' had entered an impenetrable labyrinth (Chace and Carr, 1988).

Interdependence became a fashionable, as well as useful concept, in the 1970s. It expressed the belief that a trend was set in modern and contemporary international relations towards a greater, albeit not linear and progressive, interconnectedness among its various parts. As such it was not a new idea. During the XX century, interdependence had developed in different forms and thanks to various transformations which involved, at one stage or another, trade and commerce, communications, mass tourism, cultural diplomacy, financial transactions. But it was war, and the destructive capacity it acquired, that gave interdependence a frightening face and made it necessary, indeed vital, to regulate it. Collective security, arms agreements, international institutions embodying (and projecting) the community of power that Woodrow Wilson and others wanted to create, all aimed at preventing a war which, thanks to huge technological breakthroughs, could become uncontrollable. Attempts at regulation and 'juridification' followed suit: a process that, with stops (like those witnessed after 9/11) and starts, has lasted till today (Knock, 1992; Ninkovich, 1998).

Nuclear arms took strategic interdependence to yet another dimension. Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) illustrated clearly the post-Clausewitzian (and, indeed, postmodern) nature of atomic arms. The genie of war has simply evaded the bottle provided by politics. During the Cold War, then, both powers rapidly learned to abide by the rules of nuclear deterrence. Nuclear arms radically constrained states' military sovereignty. For some scholars, this proved that nuclear proliferation could be a positive force for the overall stability of the system. Others identified in the absolute weapon and the fear of Armageddon one of the crucial factors on which a supposedly post-World War II 'long peace' had been based (Gaddis, 1987).

The two sides accumulated huge nuclear stockpiles, although the United States maintained a steady lead till the late 1960s/early 1970s. When rough parity was finally achieved, it became obvious that negotiations had to be undertaken. An arms reduction, or at least the disciplining of a potentially uncontrollable arms race, was needed for economic reasons and—according to many, but not to all strategists—to reduce the risk of a war that could annihilate the planet. However, parity and MAD were difficult to swallow for many Americans, including the soon-to-be neoconservatives. For these, they amounted to a form of appeasement. Security based upon deterrence was security based primarily, if not exclusively upon fear; and fear could paralyse will, inhibit courage, blind judgement and lead to inevitable defeat.

Furthermore, deterrence seemed to put the safety of the United States into the hands of others. Or, better, into the hands of the very 'other': the Cold War absolute and, up to a few years earlier, illegitimate enemy of the United States (Dalby, 1988; Stephanson, 1998). Again, moral and strategic imperatives were combined in the denunciation of those who were making America vulnerable and

weak, by abandoning the traditional objective of strategic primacy. For neoconservatives, ‘the United States had succumbed to the evasion and alibis of appeasement. This appeasement was embodied in an intellectual and moral error—the concept of “nuclear sufficiency”’ (Allin, 1995: 59).

This argument was played over and over again. Against the Nixon and Ford administrations; against the alleged leftist bias of the American scientific community; against the liberal tendencies of CIA analysts. Strategic interdependence was thus presented as unacceptable: because it undermined U.S. credibility vis-à-vis allies and enemies; because it tied American hands and constrained (and sometimes zeroed) its freedom of action; because it was immoral to build peace upon the certainty of global destruction in case of war; because, as Paul Nitze put it in 1979, superiority still mattered, since ‘to have an advantage at the utmost level of violence helps play at every lesser level’ (Allin, 1995: 65).

The attack on interdependence, however, was not limited to its strategic dimension. Also coming under assault were those post World War II international organizations, whose goal was to regulate and manage interdependence, and whose promotion had been a basic tenet of American liberal internationalism. The UN General Assembly, in particular, was dominated at the time by anti-U.S. views. Many new African and Asian states formed a voting bloc whose positions now found some support also in the U.S., in a vociferous as well as multicoloured New Left, who became—after realists and liberal ‘interdependentists’—the third target of neoconservative arrows.

Providing a coherent description of the New Left is impossible, for the simple reason that ‘New Left’ was often nothing more than a convenient catch-all formula, describing a multifaceted movement, whose common denominator—the search for ‘an agenda for a generation’—was from the beginning far too loose and vague. Student activists, intellectuals, artists and the many others ‘New Leftists’ were influenced by different, and not always complementary, sources: from C. Wright Mills’s critical sociology to theories of participatory democracy, from French existentialists to Frantz Fanon and anticolonialism (Gitlin, 1987; Isserman, 1987).

Impossible to define, the New Left was however very clearly profiled by its liberal and conservative opponents. In a way, the sudden emergence of a radical critique of everything Americans have stand for during the Cold War catalyzed the emergence of neoconservatism. In its first, embryonic stages, neoconservatism was, in fact, primarily a reaction to the political, cultural, moral, revisionism of the mid/late 1960s.

Such revisionism was hardly monolithic and consistent. Its sources of inspiration were multiple and often contradictory. However, to its enemies (and not just to them) it was based upon a premise that was very difficult to accept: the outright rejection of the moral certainties and the unchallengeable values of Cold War liberalism, and of the vision and political project that stemmed from them (Brinkley, 1998: 222-36; Buhle and McMillian, 2003). ‘The conservation of liberalism’, and the reaffirmation of its intrinsic ‘expansionist [...] character’ thus defined, *ab origine*, neoconservatism and what it stood for (Lindberg, 2004).

In particular, the cultural relativism of New Left and its defiance of the basic universalistic tenets of liberalism were unacceptable to many liberals. It was no coincidence that a classic primer of Cold War liberalism—Arthur Schlesinger’s *Vital Center*—was exhumed in this period. As historian John Ehrman has stressed, in the late 1960s Schlesinger’s *Vital Center* was frequently brandished against the New Left’s radical criticism of American foreign policy: ‘the leading neoconservatives—Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, to name a few were veterans of the vital center’ (Ehrman, 1995: 34; Mariano, 1999).

More or less concurrently there was a progressive rediscovery among disaffected liberals of the ‘intellectual anchor of the Cold War’: the politically and intellectually ubiquitous category of totalitarianism (Pal Singh, 2003: 173). This concept, an analytical tool and a rhetorical device that had been widely employed during the early post-World War II years, had faded progressively from the Cold War discourse, particularly after the season of détente had begun. Totalitarianism—the great

mobilizing and unifying concept of the Cold War', which 'provide[d] a plausible and frightening vision of a Manichean, radically bifurcated world'—had originally offered a politically convenient instrument, which complemented both theoretically and rhetorically the political dichotomies of the early Cold War (Gleason, 1995: 1; Adler and Paterson, 1970; Del Pero, 2004). Its rediscovery, particularly during the 1970s, had not been limited to the U.S. and to the Anglo-Saxon world: many Western European leftist intellectuals adopted it. However, this second youth of 'totalitarianism' as the primary analytical tool to decrypt the script of international politics bloomed mainly in the United States. It culminated in a famous article published in 1979 by neocon political scientist Jeane Kirkpatrick, which distinguished right-wing/transformable authoritarianisms from left-wing/unredeemable totalitarianisms (Kirkpatrick, 1979; Kirkpatrick, 1982).<sup>4</sup>

As such, totalitarianism could be also used against the intolerable moral and cultural relativism that qualified the New Left. A relativism that expressed itself in the strong fascination with Third World alternatives to the East-West divide, such as Maoism, Castroism, Portuguese variants of Nasserism or new, mainly African versions of anti-imperialism.

Such third-worldism found a warm reception in the U.N. General Assembly, whose internal equilibria had been drastically altered by the admission of new states emerging from the ruins of the last European colonies. In the general assembly, an organ that the U.S. had once been able to dominate, Washington suddenly found itself in a condition of minority, excoriated for its alleged imperialist and colonial policies. These anti-American attacks were often stereotyped and ideological. However, geopolitical considerations had indeed led the U.S. (and the Nixon administration in particular) to frequently embrace putrescent European empires, thus further alienating many recently decolonized countries (as was the case with the Portuguese colonies: before the 1974 revolution, Washington had staunchly supported Lisbon, vetoing the admission to the U.N. of Guinea-Bissau, which had been widely supported in the general assembly).

This anti-American and anti-Western attitude of the general assembly reached its climax with the famous U.N. resolution 3379, which stated that Zionism was 'a Form of Racism and Racial Discrimination'. The resolution, approved in November 1975, had been sponsored by 25 states, including some notorious dictatorships (such as Idi Amin's Uganda). To many future neoconservatives this event signalled the moral bankruptcy of the United Nations and the substantial unreformability of what had once been a primary tool of U.S. hegemony. The resolution, and the philosophy it expressed, were scathingly denounced by the U.S. ambassador at the United Nations, neoconservative guru Daniel Patrick Moynihan. On that occasion, Moynihan used words that had often been reserved to the relativism of the domestic New Left: '[...] the damage we now do to the idea of human rights and the language of human rights could well be irreversible'—Moynihan claimed—'most of the world believe in newer methods of political thought, in philosophies that do not accept the individual as distinct from and prior to the State; in philosophies that therefore do not provide any justification for the idea of human rights and philosophies that have no words by which to explain their value. If we destroy the words that were given to us by past centuries, we will not have words to replace them, for philosophy today has no such words. But there are those of us who have not forsaken these older works, still so new to much of the world. Not forsaken them now, not here, not anywhere, not ever' (Gerson, 1997: 172-3). A few months later, Moynihan would call the UN vote 'a doubly ominous event' which suggested 'a moral callousness in the West, or moral weakness'. 'Israel'—Moynihan maintained—'has become a metaphor for democracy in the world. If the Israeli democracy, which persists in the face of the uttermost peril and difficulty, can be discredited, then it can clearly be established that

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4 Despite claims to the contrary, the distinction was not new: it had been suggested, for instance, by U.S. officials and diplomats supporting the immediate inclusion of Salazarist Portugal in the developing Atlantic *communitas*.

democracy is not a political and cultural system that can survive in a perilous and difficult world. The dustbin of history is for us'<sup>5</sup>

## Un-Americanism and Exceptionalist Nationalism

This universalistic and neo-liberal attack on third-worldism and philosophical relativism was integrated by the denunciation of the lack of patriotism of those who embraced these ideas in the United States. New Left intellectuals, and the many liberal fellow travellers, were therefore targeted for their alleged unpatriotic betrayal of America's historical, time-less and universal values. The New Left was first and foremost 'Un-American'. It was a culturally, politically, intellectually and morally alien phenomenon. Under attack, Jeane Kirkpatrick claimed, was the belief that the U.S., despite all, was a 'decent and successful—though imperfect—society'. Irving Kristol asserted that American 'young radicals' were 'far less dismayed at America's failure to become what it ought to be than they [were] contemptuous of what it thinks it ought to be. For them as for Oscar Wilde, it [was] not the average American who [was] disgusting; it [was] the ideal American' (Kirkpatrick, 1973; I. Kristol, 1970: 4).

What was considered a vituperation of America generated a cultural and political backlash, which would contribute to the shaping of a distinct neoconservative identity and to the rise, in the second half of the 1970s, of the new Right. As one disgruntled U.S. political scientist would later recall, neoconservatism arose 'in reaction to what was perceived as an American political establishment that had come to see the United States as the major problem in the world, both in the East-West Cold War and in the Third World. Neoconservatives, on the other hand, saw the United States as the major solution in the world, especially with a Cold War still on in both East-West and North-South terms' (MacDonald, 2003).

Third-Worldism and the New Left were therefore presented as extraneous to real America. To its way of life, its values, and its beliefs. Most of all, to its faith in the role that the U.S. should play in the world, and in the moral and transformative potential of its power. What's relevant for our analysis is that the same kind of criticism was directed towards the other two products of (and responses to) the crisis of the late 1960s/early 1970s: realism (in its Kissingeresque or 'continental' variation) and interdependence (primarily in its 'liberal-institutionalist' academic variant). Kissingerism, interdependence and the New Left shared a common element in the eyes of their neoconservative critics: their un-Americanism and their extraneousness to American political and even philosophical traditions.

Realism, as we have seen, was presented as a typically un-American way of conceiving international relations and the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. The Vietnam war and the discredit it brought upon idealist crusades and modernization strategies had made a-moral *realpolitik* attractive and appealing to the American public. The idea that America could finally move out of perennial adolescence and be initiated into the harsh realities of world politics was indeed very popular in the early 1970s. Kissinger, the 'American Metternich', conveniently (and opportunistically) played the role of the statesman that could teach the United States how to behave in the international arena. On this, the German émigré turned into an American statesman was able to build for a short span of time his fame and his political fortunes, both of which reached their apogee in 1973-74. Continental realism, in its Kissingerian variant, thus seemed to offer a way out of the tunnel that the U.S. had entered (Hanhimäki, 2004; Hanhimäki, 2003; Isaacson, 1992; Gaddis, 1994; Beisner, 1990).

However, Kissinger's fame faded rapidly. The crusade for a new morality in U.S. foreign policy, launched by the neoconservatives and by Reagan's new right, hit Kissingerism hard. The supposedly un-American nature of Kissinger's approach to international affairs, indeed its initially mesmerizing

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5 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, 'We are Sakharov', July 5, 1976, commencement address of Daniel Patrick Moynihan at the convocation of Hebrew University, Henry M. Jackson Papers, University of Washington Libraries, Manuscripts Collections, Seattle, WA (hereinafter, HMJP, UWLMC), Accession No. 3560-6 (Foreign Policy and Defense Issues), Subject Files, Box 37.

'Europeanness', began to be harshly rebuked. One *National Review* commentator went as far as to describe Kissinger as an 'unassimilated outsider [...] a European by heritage and cultural choice, a cosmopolitan by circumstance, an American by deliberate (and hazardous) calculation' who 'revealed the derivative nature of his national identity in almost pathetic fashion' (Laqueur, 1973: 46).

Kissinger ended up being attacked within the Ford administration. In 1975 he lost his position as National Security Adviser and saw détente with the Soviet Union denounced by new members of the administration, such as the young Ford's chief of staff and then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. Ambassador at the United Nations and democratic maverick, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, systematically challenged Kissinger's approach during his tenure at the U.N. The principal of non-interference was rejected outright by Moynihan. Freedom, he believed, could not survive in one country alone. Instead of retreating into his shell, the United States should re-embrace its security tradition, based upon the spread of democracy and free-markets, the defense of human rights and the rejection of any form of a-moral power politics. In a talk called 'Was Woodrow Wilson right?' Moynihan, claimed that the United States had to accept the 'duty to defend and, where possible, advance democratic principles in the world at large' for 'democracy in one country was not enough simply because it would not last [...] There will be no struggle for personal liberty (or national independence or national survival) anywhere in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America which will not affect American politics. In that circumstance, I would argue that there is only one course likely to make the internal strains of consequent conflicts enduring, and that is for the United States deliberately and consistently to bring its influence to bear on behalf of those regimes which promise the largest degree of personal and national liberty' (Moynihan, 1974: 26-8).

An often idealized version of Wilsonian idealism was thus juxtaposed to the alleged realist turn of the early 1970s. Realism/Kissingerism was denounced as un-American because it was based upon an unacceptable premise: that all the actors taking part in the international drama were in the end morally equivalent. For such realism power did make the difference and defined, eventually, a world hierarchy. However, morality—much to the horror of Jackson, Moynihan, Reagan *et al.*—did not seem to have a place in international relations. Kissinger attempted to face the sudden decline of his popularity by lecturing the American public on this. Despite all his efforts, the mood in the country had changed. Reagan's calls for a return of 'morality in foreign policy' proved to be much more successful.

Reagan did not gain the nomination, but the democratic candidate Jimmy Carter would use the 'morality issue' effectively in his campaign to defeat Ford and bring an end to Kissinger's experience in government. Kissinger—Carter proclaimed critically a few days before the elections—had promoted a foreign policy 'obsessed with power blocs' and 'spheres of influence'; 'a foreign policy based on secrecy' that by definition 'has had to be closely guarded and amoral' (Hanhimäki, 2004: 435-6 and 450-1).

At the same time 'interdependentists' were also condemned as a manifestation of an un-American (and very European) virus that was spreading, unchecked, through a once healthy America. For realism, states were independent and morally equivalent units of an anarchic and intrinsically competitive system. America's traditional claims to moral superiority did not easily fit into such a vision. However, stressing the interdependence of the various subjects of the international system was equally at odds with the America intended by neoconservatives. While realism stressed independence as much as moral equivalence, interdependence emphasized mutual dependence and interconnectedness: the inexorable loss, or significant reduction, of national sovereignty. All countries being interconnected, and mutually dependent, they claimed that even the United States, this once unique and exceptional nation, found itself constrained by an objective situation and by a set of rules, norms and practices that it had itself crucially contributed to create. Interdependence thus seemed to put the fate of America also, when not primarily, into the hands of others.

As I pointed out earlier, however, it was strategic interdependence that proved impossible to accept. The search for primacy and power preponderance, a traditional goal of U.S. Cold War foreign

policy, had been justified in strategic and psychological terms. In a ‘total symbolic war’, as the Cold War was, America’s unchallengeable superiority would strengthen Washington’s credibility vis-à-vis its friends and enemies. And credibility was an invaluable asset in the perennial post-1945 struggle for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the people (Leffler, 1992; Ninkovich, 1998).

Through superiority, Americans were assured that, all things considered, the U.S. would preserve its nuclear supremacy. Despite the horrible costs of any hypothetical new war, the U.S. could again emerge from a world war as the final victor (Trachtenberg, 1991).

Such promises were however increasingly meaningless. To say that explicitly, as an exasperated Kissinger once did, was nevertheless politically impossible. Accepting the principle of nuclear sufficiency had much to do with the Vietnam crisis and with the impressive rearmament undertaken by the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it proved difficult, if not impossible, to impose this change onto the American public; evermore so, after it became known that the first Salt agreement granted the Soviets a clear superiority in heavy intercontinental missiles (well balanced by America’s lead in other categories and by its technological advantage) (Garthoff, 1994).

Sufficiency seemed to many to be just a one-way stop towards inferiority. This explains the loud request for a return to the safer and more acceptable principle of superiority. Even more, it explains the developing of a dream that is still very much with us: the creation of a defensive shield, capable of defending the republic and of making it, once more, unassailable. A shield that would allow the country to regain its lost sovereignty and, with it, its freedom of action; to reacquire the independence; to remake the U.S. an exceptional nation, exempted from those laws of history that the other nations had instead to abide by.<sup>6</sup>

We need here to mention an ideological and discursive construct—exceptionalism—that has accompanied the United States from its inception, and which had undergone a deep crisis in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, only to be relaunched in the following years. The ideology of American exceptionalism, as Australian historian Ian Tyrrel brilliantly illustrated some years ago, is based upon the ‘pre-historicist idea of the United States as a special case ‘outside’ the normal patterns and laws of history’. It is an ideology that ‘runs deep in American experience’ and that conveniently overlooks the many interactions that have always existed between the United States and the rest of the world, Europe in particular. And it is an ideology that generates many paradoxes: its assertion of uniqueness and separation expresses, in historian Tiziano Bonazzi’s apt definition, ‘an acute need of Europe [...] that cannot be explained only in psychological and cultural terms, but with the fact that, as much as it denied it, the United States belonged to Europe’. In America’s exceptionalist self-representation, Europe would thus become a *persona ficta*, an *alter ego* in which the United States could (and can) mirror and represent itself. By doing so, America’s exceptionalism originates a ‘rhetoric of absences’, where the absences are however ‘the ills and defects of a universalized external world’, to the point of determining a situation in which ‘having posited its identity in difference, and its difference in exemption from the rule, the American myth lies, in its own way ‘elsewhere’’ (Tyrrel, 1991: 1031; Bonazzi 2003; 383; Bonazzi, 2004; Rodgers, 1998: 24).

Neoconservatism, its vision of the world, and its idea of America’s role and mission in the international arena stemmed from this exceptionalist nationalism: an ideology of ‘national greatness’, based upon the premise that the United States will not fall, whatever might happen. Cold War liberalism had adhered to such belief, and had contributed to a *de facto* globalization of American nationalism (Fousek, 2000; Stephanson, 1995). But this nationalist/universalist creed had been radically shaken by Vietnam, internal turmoil and, obviously, détente. Those years saw the disintegration of the consensus on which the universalist assumptions of Cold War liberalism had until then rested (Suri, 2003).

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6 Vivid nationalist and exceptionalist *topoi* permeated for instance most of Reagan’s speeches on its Strategic Defense Initiative (Fitzgerald, 2001).

Neoconservatism was therefore the last remake of U.S. exceptionalist nationalism. It affirmed the intrinsic uniqueness of America. It asserted the superior quality of the American nation and the benign nature of the overwhelming power that the United States had come over time to possess [Lieven, 2004]. However, exceptionalist nationalism could not, by itself, provide a sufficient political and cultural platform. Neoconservatism, as we have seen, offered an intellectual and political exit strategy from the crisis, real or perceived, that America underwent in the 1960s and early 1970s. An exit strategy from the abrupt disappearance of those moral and political certainties that had provided the pillars of U.S. Cold War policies and discourse.

The other exit strategies we previously discussed—Kissingerism, interdependence, and New Left third-worldism—could be easily, but mistakenly, categorized as un-American. The U.S. was indeed often presented by them as either morally equivalent to other states, interlocked in the inexorable web of global interdependence, or imperialist and much responsible for many world's injustices and inequalities. However, despite the neoconservatives' claims, these three responses to the crisis all had a distinctive, some could say exceptional, American blend. Kissinger was in many ways the quintessential and paradigmatic product of a specifically U.S. national security establishment, whose various vogues he had frequently followed. He shared with neoconservatives a strong disdain for Western European allies and their alleged inclinations to appeasement to the point of urging a new 'agonizing reappraisal' of the Atlantic relationship.<sup>7</sup> Most 'interdependentists' believed in a global legalism, indeed in a juridification of international relations, whose intellectual and political premises were very much American (Maguire, 2001). Finally, in the confused magma of the New Left one could easily find the shining sparks of a radical and leftist exceptionalist legacy, either it being communitarianism, traditional progressivism or populism. Most New Left's exponents embraced what they believed were long forgotten American values and principles: their 'élan and language' were often 'utterly American' and 'steeped into traditional American individualism' (McCracken, 2003). Similarly, revisionist historiography frequently offered a distinctively exceptionalist reading of American history (Doenecke, 2001; Ribuffo, 2001; Buhle and Rice-Maximin, 1995).

Caricaturing them as un-American was therefore as convenient as it was disingenuous for neoconservatives. However, it was not enough to offer a credible and alternative exit strategy. It could be little more than a good starting point.

Re-asserting the values of Cold War liberalism was not sufficient, either. Times had changed, and the challenge, while emanating from the same source (i.e., Communism and the Soviet Union), had modified its tactics. Furthermore, many Cold War liberal icons—beginning with Schlesinger—were moving in the opposite direction, towards what neoconservatives believed was a new and self-defeating appeasement of the totalitarian challenge.

More was therefore needed to construct a new identity and the political project that should follow it. This badly needed surplus was found by opposing the other exit-strategies. It was constructed in negative and oppositional, but nonetheless very powerful, terms.

A neoconservative could be defined as a 'liberal mugged by reality', in a well-known definition attributed to Irving Kristol. Reality and realism were therefore brandished against the many political and philosophical utopias to which Americans had fallen prey. Utopias which had contributed to generate totalitarian projects or, as in the case of naive liberals, had made them blind to the perils that the existential threat of Communism was still posing to the United States.

There was (or there was supposed to be) a philosophical underpinning to this anti-utopian and anti-totalitarian new realism and it was distinctively anti-European. Anglo-American pragmatic liberalism, heir of the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment, was in fact contrasted to what Irving Kristol called the

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7 Telephone Call between Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon, November 3, 1973, NARA, NPMP, Telcons, Chronological File, Box 22.

‘French-Continental enlightenment’ (here Kristol’s anti-utopian view was a very rough and simplified version of that of Jacob Talmon). According to Kristol, American liberalism had fallen ‘under the influence of the insidious French continental tradition’ pushing it *de facto* toward totalitarianism (Gleason, 1995: 193-194; I. Kristol, 1993).

Mugged by a reality that many liberals had now chosen not to see, neoconservatives appeared nonetheless to have been also realist neophytes, persistently mugged by the powerful and unavoidable legacy of traditional U.S. missionary idealism. If realism was waved against naïve utopianism of any kind, idealism was invoked against the cynical, a-moral, value-free *realpolitik* then infecting U.S. attitudes toward world affairs. Even from this perspective, Europe was the chief villain. It was again no coincidence that the realism under attack was frequently adjectived and qualified as ‘continental’ (i.e., European) realism, much different from its Anglo-Saxon or American version. Continental realism was therefore presented as a self-defeating version of the realist creed; its primary trait—its critics maintained—was a deeply-embedded historical pessimism: in the future of the world and, most of all, in America’s willingness and capacity to mould it accordingly to its values, needs and desires.

What qualified the neoconservative project was thus its belief in America’s uniqueness and its optimistic faith that such uniqueness could be used as a force for good in the international arena. Neoconservatism was unmistakably American and optimistic: ‘the first variant of American conservatism in the past century that is in the American grain’, according to Irving Kristol. And therefore ‘hopeful, not lugubrious; forward-looking, not nostalgic’, whose ‘general tone is cheerful, not grim or dyspeptic. Its 20<sup>th</sup> century heroes’ were ‘TR, FDR, and Ronald Reagan. Such Republican and conservative worthies as Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, and Barry Goldwater’ were ‘politely overlooked’ (I. Kristol, 2003; Romero, 2003; Ikenberry, 2004).

Optimism and anti-Europeanism were, *ab origine*, the twin keystones on which neoconservatism was founded. This long before 9/11, Rumsfeld’s remarks on ‘Old Europe’, and the very popular gendered division between a virile and martial America and a feminine and passive Europe (Kagan, 2003; Cox, 2003).

Optimism, exceptionalism, nationalism and anti-Europeanism were however complemented by an almost schizophrenic attempt on the part of neoconservatives to simultaneously play and reconcile realist anti-utopianism and utopian anti-realism; balances of power and universal freedoms. Neoconservatism, as its oxymoronic name implies, offered from the beginning a syncretic and ultimately incoherent message. This structural inconsistency contributed towards increasing its appeal, but undermined the coherence of its proposal from the start.

### **Out of the 1970s, into the New Millennium: Neoconservatism Tested.**

Reagan’s success had a dual effect on neoconservatives. First, it catalyzed a diaspora within the democratic camp that, with some notable exceptions (Moynihan among them), led most neoconservatives to join the Republican Party. Second, it granted to some neocons—such as Jeane Kirkpatrick and Henry Jackson’s *aide-de-campe*, Richard Perle—the possibility to play an important role in the new Republican administration.<sup>8</sup>

Reagan’s nationalist posture, his morally bombastic rhetoric and, most of all, his support to missile defense elicited neocons’ enthusiasm. This enthusiasm, however, cooled rapidly. Reagan’s Middle East policy, in particular, did not satisfy neoconservatives’ requests for a radical change in the course undertaken the previous decade. Reagan’s decision to sell the AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia, signalled his intention to follow Kissinger’s strategy in the region. The goal remained to preserve an advantageous geopolitical configuration of power, and to maximize stability (and consequent access to

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8 Kirkpatrick was appointed ambassador at the U.N. Perle was named Assistant Secretary of Defense for international security policy.

resources), to the detriment of political transformation, democratization and extension of Western and U.S. cultural hegemony (Ehrman, 1995: 145-48).

Reagan's opening to Gorbachev was seen by many (though not all) neoconservatives as *détente* redux. The leading neocon magazine, *Commentary*, continued to emphasize the Soviet expansionist design, now camouflaged behind Gorbachev's bid to give a human face to Soviet Socialism. All in all, the business of governing a country, within the constraints that the Cold War still imposed, proved difficult to conciliate with the radicalism of the neoconservative vision.

The presidency of George Bush senior (1989-1992) saw a further decline in the neoconservatives' influence. U.S. foreign policy became even more cautious and, for many neocons, far too pro-Arab (Secretary of State, James Baker, in particular, was accused of being insensitive to Israel's security needs). Much to neocons' disapproval, Kissinger's acolytes (Brent Scowcroft and Lawrence Eagleburger) and moderate conservatives, like Baker himself, took control of American foreign policy. Some neoconservatives—Joshua Muravchik among them—went as far as to endorse Bill Clinton in 1992 [Muravchik, 1993; Ehrman, 1995].

The 1990s were seen and interpreted very ambiguously by neoconservatives. The end of the Cold War was seen as a vindication of the policies they had supported in the 1970s. The USSR—they claimed—had finally been trounced by Reagan's confrontational stance and by his re-launching of the arms competition, not by the appeasers' attempts to coopt and integrate Moscow into the liberal and interdependent world order. Similarly, the impressive boom of the U.S. economy in the 1990s, and the rapid waning of the much feared Japanese challenge, proved that fashionable talks of America's decline, which had inundated libraries and bookshops in the previous decade, were mostly unfounded. Declinism, the trendy and dominant paradigm in the 1980s, had simply been proved wrong. The gloomy post-Vietnam pessimism was finally overcome.

At the same time, however, the neocons' marginalization continued unabated, in the country and in U.S. conservatism at large. Many commentators, and some neoconservatives themselves, proclaimed the final and complete amalgamation of neoconservatives within U.S. mainstream conservatism, in spite of their dissatisfaction with Bob Dole in 1996 and with the same George W. Bush in 2000 (many neoconservatives, including *Weekly Standard's* editors, William Kristol and David Brooks, endorsed Arizona senator John McCain during the republican primaries).

The intellectual trends of the period, even within the Republican world, contributed to this marginalization. The very popular 'ends of history', in whatever form they were presented, left little room for the idealistic missions and the global crusades that neoconservatives had always been fond of. The 'clashes of civilizations', on the other hand, were simultaneously a manifesto (albeit very ambiguous) of a cultural relativism that was completely at odds with the neocons' universalism and of a surreptitious realism, in which civilizations replaced states as the ultimately impenetrable and antagonistic units of the international system (Fukuyama, 1991; Huntington, 1996).

Lastly, but most importantly, during the 1990s, the moral issue came again to the fore of neoconservatives' preoccupations. Under the neocons' critical gaze came the inherent philosophy of Clinton's foreign policy and his attempt to promote globalization and enlarge the area of free markets, without tackling the very political problems that were obstructing the full unfolding of U.S. and Western hegemony. To neoconservatives this appeared not just as 'internationalism on the cheap', but as a fundamentally a-political and a-moral project, reflecting a sort of economic determinism that greatly overestimated the imminent transformative strength of economic mechanisms. It was—according to William Kristol and Robert Kagan—a situation 'reminiscent of the mid-1970s'. To preserve and possibly expand U.S. hegemony 'a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of military supremacy and moral confidence was needed'. American foreign policy—Kagan and Kristol proclaimed—had to 'be informed with a clear moral purpose, based on the understanding that its moral goals and its fundamental national interests' were 'always in harmony'. A 'remoralization of America at home' required 'remoralization of American foreign policy. For both follow from Americans' belief that the

principles of the Declaration of Independence' were 'not merely the choices of a particular culture', but 'universal, enduring, 'self-evident' truths'. This was, after all, 'the main point of the conservatives' war against a relativistic multiculturalism. For conservatives to preach the importance of upholding the core elements of the Western tradition at home, but to profess indifference to the fate of American principles abroad' was 'an inconsistency that cannot help but gnaw at the heart of conservatism' (W. Kristol and Kagan, 1996: 27-31).

Similar concerns were expressed by Irving Kristol. The world—Kristol claimed in a 1997 op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*—had 'never seen an imperium of this kind, and it is hard to know what to make of it. In its favor, it lack[ed] the brute coercion that characterized European imperialism. But it also lack[ed] the authentic missionary spirit of that older imperialism, which aimed to establish the rule of law while spreading Christianity [...] what it' did 'offer the world' was 'a growth economy, a 'consumerist' society, popular elections and a dominant secular-hedonistic ethos [...] a combination that' was 'hard to resist—and equally hard to respect in its populist vulgarity [...] an imperium with a minimum of moral substance' (I. Kristol, 1997). Freedom—declared on his part neoconservative historian Michael Ledeen—had been 'betrayed': the U. S. 'led a global democratic revolution, won the Cold War' but then simply 'walked away'(Ledeen, 1996).

The liberal empire then taking form was very different to the one that neoconservatives had long dreamed of. This despite the fact that some of the military interventions the neocons had invoked were finally undertaken during the last decade of the XX century. Either defended as 'humanitarian wars' or harshly denounced as expression of a new 'military humanism', these interventions were certainly coherent with neoconservatives' requests to exercise U.S. overwhelming power for the defense of human rights and the global spread of democracy. Nonetheless, some neoconservative commentator, such as Charles Krauthammer, denounced them from a realist perspective, presenting them as futile exercises, and as wasting American resources in areas (such as Kosovo) that were substantially irrelevant for the U.S. national interest (Krauthammer, 1999).

Neoconservatives were given an important role in the Bush Jr. administration. This was due to the new President's political ideas, which were in many ways much more radical than those of his father or of 1996 Republican candidate, Bob Dole. For the first time since the Reagan's presidency, neoconservatives came to occupy important positions in the administration. John Bolton was appointed undersecretary of State for arms control; I. Lewis Libby became vice-President Cheney's chief of staff; Richard Perle headed the non-governmental/very influential Defense Policy Board finally; Stephen Hadley was named deputy national security adviser; many other neocons were appointed to less important posts. But the most important prize was certainly won by Johns Hopkins University political scientist Paul Wolfowitz, who became Rumsfeld's deputy at Defense (Woodward, 2002; Drew, 2003; Mann, 2004).

However, and despite later conspiratorial claims to the contrary, a neoconservative (or 'Straussian') cabal did not take control of the United States and of its foreign policy in January 2001. From its inception, the Bush administration was a sort of coalition of different conservative breeds: hard-nosed nationalists (Cheney and Rumsfeld); self-proclaimed intellectual realists (Rice); traditional republican internationalists (Powell and Armitage); the religious Right (Ashcroft); and, finally, the neoconservatives themselves.<sup>9</sup> With the advent of Bush Jr., neoconservatives became again very influential, but were not at all hegemonic, in the administration and within American political and intellectual conservatism at large.

Then came 9/11 and the overall balance of power within the administration changed drastically. The neoconservatives' radical, and until then minority, vision was adopted as the Administration's

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9 These partitions are quite arbitrary. Many of these 'conservatisms' do obviously overlap. However, they are useful to comprehend the multiform diversity of U.S. conservatism and of the Bush administration itself. See Daalder and Lindsay, 2003; Halper and Clarke, 2004; Berman, 1994.

policy. The neoconservatives' denunciation of the 'dis-functionality' of the Middle East suddenly appeared prophetic. Their traditional condemnation of the Faustian deal accepted by the U.S. in the region (i.e., stability and access to resources in exchange for lack of hegemony and cultural impermeability) were vindicated.

But why was this so? Why did neoconservatism seem to offer a viable political (and geo-political) response to the new challenge at the time?

Many critical commentators have claimed that 9/11 triggered into action the long sleeping projects of the new American Right. Namely: to retune America's dominance in the Atlantic Alliance; to relaunch a vast program of high-tech military investments, further consolidating and expanding the U.S. uncontested strategic primacy; to free intelligence agencies of the residual restraints imposed on them in the mid and late 1970s; to finally get rid of Saddam Hussein and start the political and cultural transformation of the Middle East.

There is more than a grain of truth in all of this. Neoconservatives certainly saw the proof that they had been right all along in the dramatic events of September the 11<sup>th</sup>, and that their criticism of U.S. foreign policy and its approach to external threats had been correct. And they seized this opportunity to convince Bush to adopt policies and implement actions they had long advocated.

But there was more to it than this. Once Bush declared a war against terrorism, a new surge of exceptionalist patriotism followed suit, and Neoconservatism was principally, as we have seen, a manifestation of a powerful and alluring nationalism. Once Islamic terrorism was declared a new 'totalitarian' menace, by liberals and conservatives alike, the response could only be couched in moral absolutes.<sup>10</sup> And once again, neoconservatism offered powerful moral dichotomies: it had been created, as an intellectual and political phenomenon, as a result of them. Finally, and most importantly, the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon catalysed a request for bold visions and radical projects. Only the neocons seemed to offer one, in the Republican world and, probably, in the entire country. Therefore, neoconservatism was (or appeared to be) at the time the only real 'crisis internationalism' available in the market of political ideas in the United States. In this sense, it was indeed Wilsonian, as many commentators would later claim (Hassner, 2002; Rhodes, 2003; Fukuyama, 2004). A 'crisis internationalism' is, in historian Frank Ninkovich's apt definition, an attempt 'to develop new rules for navigating through a turbulent and unpredictable modern international environment', when relevant crises render 'the old rules of the game and foreign policy traditions out of date'. Such attempt has a deeply embedded American grain, and reflects America's response to modernity and its dark face, of which Islamic radicalism appeared to be the new and latest expression: a response that is 'extraordinarily optimistic and progressive on the one hand, yet afflicted by a sense of extraordinary, perhaps unmanageable crisis, on the other' (Ninkovich, 1998: 10-12).

For many Americans, post 9/11 2001 was not a time for cautious realism, because cautiousness is not appropriate in dramatic and emotional times. Nor it was a time for weak idealism or, even worse, irenic escapisms, because—many argued—when survival is at stake, hesitations must be overcome and scruples must be abandoned. It was, in the final analysis, a time when power and ideas, strength and principles, force and mission had to be reconciled; when circumstances imposed the United States to be both utopian and implacable: because an alternative to what the world had become (and to the intolerable situation in the Middle East) appeared indispensable, and the will and determination to pursue that goal to the end, with whatever means, were deemed necessary.

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10 According to editor of the *Weekly's Standard*, David Gelernter, a terrorist is 'a totalitarian out of office'. Gelernter, 2004. Similarly, liberal commentator Paul Berman presented the war against terrorism as a struggle against a new totalitarianism. The war in Iraq was therefore needed to 'discourage and defeat' the 'mass totalitarian movement of the Muslim world'. Defeating 'totalitarianism'—Berman claimed—was (and is) a necessary step to promote the global cause of 'liberalism'. Roundtable, *Slate*, 2004 and Berman, 2003.

The syncretic neoconservative message was there to satisfy such a request. This was also due to the fact that what was really asked (or what was more popular in post 9/11 America) was a ‘persuasion’, and not a policy. Americans asked for optimistic and sanguine responses, and not for fatalistic (as much as realistic) clichés, according to which terrorism could not be defeated and eradicated, but only contained and limited. And neoconservatism was indeed a very optimistic ‘persuasion’, more than a consistent political project (I. Kristol, 2003; Bai, 2004).

This explains the return of that very combination of utopianism and *realpolitik*, of morality and power that qualified, *ab origine*, the neoconservative message. And this explains also the reaffirmation of the traditional conviction that it is only the global expansion of U.S. style democracy that can ultimately guarantee the security of America itself; that the United States, as asserted in a popular World War II slogan, cannot live in a world which is ‘half free and half slave’ (Foner, 1998: 219-247; Stephanson, 2000).

Hence, the ‘balance of power that favors freedom’ of the 2002 NSS: a ‘confused’ and ‘even meaningless concept’, according to U.S. diplomatic historian Melvin Leffler (Leffler, 2003: 10). ‘Meaningless’ because it tries to associate a realist quintessential model—a situation in which overwhelming power cannot last, because power balancing is the inevitable (and intrinsic) fate of the international system—with a typically messianic and idealistic goal—spreading a preponderant and universal freedom, that by itself cannot be balanced. The former envisions equilibrium, the latter aspires instead to hegemony.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the ‘balance of power for freedom’ is a slogan capable of combining and uniting the two founding elements of neoconservatism, and of reconciling, at least rhetorically, their intrinsic duality. This also explains the success of the other slogans coined by neocons in these past three years: from calls to promote a ‘moral and muscular [...] Real Demokratik’ (Kuchpan, 2004) to Charles Krauthammer’s recent invitation to support a new and realistic ‘democratic globalism’: ‘beyond power. Beyond interest [...] expansive and utopian’ yet sharing ‘realism’s insights about the centrality of power’ and ‘having appropriate contempt for the fictional legalisms of liberal internationalism’ (Krauthammer, 2004).

The events of the past two years, and the war in Iraq in particular, have probably proved this duality incompatible. They have shown that even today a policy—sober, cautious, realistic and, possibly, relativistic—is still preferable to a persuasion. And they have shown, once more, that power – unchallengeable, ‘unbalanceable’ and unprecedented as the one the U.S. can currently deploy– is unlikely, on its own, to generate and spread liberty and democracy. Finally, the intervention in Iraq also seems to have contributed to a paradoxical normalization of the ‘war on terror’. Undertaken to defeat international terrorism and change the Middle East, it has evolved into a further step in transforming the emergency and the crisis into normalcy and rule. The struggle against terrorism is ceasing to be a transient and transitory stage—a crisis indeed—to become the norm and the long-term perspective of the new international system. All in all, neoconservatism as a quintessentially ‘crisis internationalism’ has contributed not towards solving the crisis, but towards both escalating and normalizing it.

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<sup>11</sup> A different view from the one presented here can be found in Gaddis, 2004.

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