

## What is a neo-conservative anyway?

By Jim Lobe

With all the attention paid to neo-conservatives in the international media, one would think that there would be a standard definition of the term. Yet, despite their having been credited with a virtual takeover of US foreign policy during the first administration of President George W Bush, a common understanding of the term remains elusive.

In this context, it may be useful to offer some description of their basic tenets and origin, if for no other reason than to distinguish them from other parts of the ideological coalition behind the administration's neo-imperialist trajectory; namely, the traditional Republican *machtpolitikers*, such as Vice President Dick Cheney and Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, and the Christian Rightists, such as former Attorney-General John Ashcroft, Gary Bauer and Pat Robertson.

The so-called neo-con godfather, Irving Kristol once remarked that a neo-conservative is a "liberal who was mugged by reality". True to that description, neo-conservatives generally originated on the left side of the political spectrum and some times from the far left. Many neo-cons, such as Kristol himself, have Trotskyite roots that are still reflected in their polemical and organizational tendencies and ideological zeal.

Although a number of prominent Catholics are neo-conservatives, the movement remains predominantly Jewish, and the monthly journal that really defined neo-conservatism over the past 35 years, *Commentary*, is published by the American Jewish Committee. At the same time, however, neo-conservative attitudes have reflected a minority position within the US Jewish community as most Jews remain distinctly liberal in their political and foreign policy views.

Neo-conservative foreign policy positions, which have their origin in opposition to the "new left" of the 1960s, fears over a return to US isolationism during the Vietnam War and the progressive international isolation of Israel in the wake of wars with its Arab neighbors in 1967 and 1973, have been tactically very flexible over the past 35 years, but their key principles have remained the same.

They begin with the basic foreign policy realism found in the pessimistic views of human nature and international diplomacy of the English political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, that neo-cons share with most US practitioners: that "the condition of man [in a state of nature] ... is a condition of war of everyone against everyone." Or, as Machiavelli, another favorite thinker of the neo-cons, wrote, "Men are more ready for evil than for good."

But neo-cons take "man's" capacity for evil particularly seriously, and for understandable reasons. For neo-conservatives, the Nazi Holocaust that killed some 6 million Jews during World War II is the seminal experience of the 20th century. Not only was it a genocide unparalleled in its thoroughness, the Holocaust also wiped out family members of hundreds of thousands of Jewish citizens in the United States, including, for example, close relatives of the parents of former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz.

For neo-conservatives, as for most Jews, the Holocaust represents absolute evil, and the factors

which contributed to the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany and the subsequent extermination of Jews must be fought at all costs.

"The defining moment in our history was certainly the Holocaust," Richard Perle, a key neo-con and leading advocate of war with Iraq, told BBC's Panorama. "It was the destruction, the genocide of a whole people, and it was the failure to respond in a timely fashion to a threat that was clearly gathering. We don't want that to happen again, and when we have the ability to stop totalitarian regimes we should do so, because when we fail to do so, the results are catastrophic," he said.

For neo-conservatives, as for many hawks, the 1938 Munich agreement, under which Hitler was permitted by Britain and France to take over Czechoslovakia, is the epitome of appeasement that led directly to the Holocaust. As a result, Munich and appeasement are constantly invoked in their rhetoric as a way to summon up the will to resist and defeat the enemy of the day. Hence, almost every conflict in which the United States has been engaged since the late 1960s - from Vietnam to Central America to Yugoslavia to the "war on terror" in Iraq and against al-Qaeda - has been portrayed as a new Munich in which the enemy represents a threat virtually on a par with Hitler.

The resulting worldview tends to Manichaeism - the notion that the world consists of a permanent struggle between the forces of good and evil, light and dark (an idea which incidentally accords very well both with the thinking of the Christian Right, not to mention of Bush himself). As Michael Ledeen, a close collaborator of Perle's at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) told the same BBC program, "I know the struggle against evil is going to go on forever."

Three major factors are seen as having contributed to the Holocaust: the failure of the liberal Weimar Republic in Germany to prevent the Nazis' rise; "appeasement"; and US isolationism that kept Washington from intervening in World War II earlier.

Although neo-cons profess devotion to liberal democracy, they have never hesitated to assail "liberalism", or what they sometimes call with their Christian Right allies "secular humanism", whose relativism, in their view, can lead to "a culture of appeasement", nihilism or worse. Thus, even while supposedly defending "liberal" and democratic ideals, their attitude is at best ambivalent.

Appeasement is prevented, in their view, by a powerful military capable of defeating any foe, the constant anticipation of new threats, and the willingness to preempt them. Thus, neo-cons have consistently favored big defense budgets, a stance shared by the right-wing *macht*politikers with whom they formed an alliance in the 1970s to end detente with Moscow. In their view, peace is to be distrusted, and peace processes are inherently suspect. "Peace doesn't come from a 'process'," wrote Wall Street Journal editorial writer Robert Pollock last year in a column that denounced the 1990s as a "decade of appeasement".

In this view, war is a natural state, and peace is a Utopian dream which induces softness, decadence and pacifism embodied by Bill Clinton whose "corruption of the national mission,

combined with the myth that peace is normal, produces a solvent strong enough to dissolve the strength of our armed forces and the integrity of our political and military leaders", Ledeen wrote in 2000.

Similarly, enemies cannot be negotiated with. "Before the US can worry about rebuilding Iraq, it has to win militarily, and decisively so," the *Journal* wrote just before the war. "... Arab cultures despise weakness in an adversary above all," a refrain familiar to past neo-con descriptions of the Soviet Union, China, and other geo-political foes.

Finally, US engagement in world affairs is absolutely indispensable in preventing catastrophe, according to neo-con ideology which, in the words of another Perle intimate, Ken Adelman, sees "isolationism [as] the default option" in US foreign policy. Indeed, many neo-cons, fearing that the Cold War's end would revive isolationism, spent most of the 1990s hawking policies designed to maintain Washington's international engagement, even if that meant supporting Clinton when he deployed troops abroad.

Why? If evil is embodied by Hitler and similar threats, the United States comes as close to moral goodness as can be found in the world today, according to the neo-cons. "Since America's emergence as a world power roughly a century ago," Elliott Abrams, another prominent neo-con who currently serves as the top Middle East policymaker on Bush's National Security Council, wrote in a *Commentary* colloquium in 2000, "we have made many errors, but we have been the greatest force for good among the nations of the Earth. A diminution of American power or influence bodes ill for our country, our friends, and our principles".

Thus, US intervention abroad, as in Iraq, is seen in the best possible light. Michael Kelly, a *Washington Post* columnist who died in an accident during the Iraq campaign, once assured his readers that, "what President Bush aspires to now, is not exactly imperialism. It is something more like armed evangelism".

The moral goodness of the US is beyond question and justifies - indeed requires - a unilateralist policy lest, by subjecting its will to the wishes or agreements of other countries or international institutions, the US would actually prevent itself from fulfilling its moral mission.

This notion - that Washington would taint itself morally by working through multilateral institutions or tying itself to alliances with lesser countries - is certainly not unique to neo-conservatives. It has been around since George Washington warned the country in his Farewell Address against "entangling alliances" with European powers.

But the neo-conservatives have tried hard to reinforce this idea. Thus, in an attack on the UN Security Council, Perle argued, "This is a dangerously wrong idea that leads inexorably to handing great moral and even existential politico-military decisions, to the likes of Syria, Cameroon, Angola, Russia, China, and France." It echoes a refrain delivered by *Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer over 15 years ago about the UN, "Let it sink," he wrote. "It is corrupting."

This sense of US moral superiority applies especially to what, during the Iraq war, was called "Old Europe", much as it was in US foreign policy until Washington's entry into World War II.

Thus, Kelly, again writing about US imperial altruism: "Unlike the European powers, the United States has never sought to own the world. In its peculiarly American fashion, it has sought to make the world behave better, indeed *be* better."

Similarly, in recent years, countless neo-con columns and editorials in the *Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *The Weekly Standard* (edited by Irving Kristol's son, William) cited a wave of attacks against Jewish targets across Europe, almost all of them carried out by Muslim immigrants or their children, as evidence of a resurgent anti-Semitism distinctly reminiscent of the 1920s and 1930s. "The whole of Europe is sick," wrote Paul Johnson, an English neo-con, in the *Journal*, while, in one of his milder remarks, Perle accused Europe of losing its "moral compass" over Iraq. Robert Kagan's much-celebrated depiction of Europeans being from Venus and Americans from Mars is an even milder version of the same basic worldview: compared to forthright, masculine Americans, Europeans are passive, decadent and unwilling to stand up for what is right.

Washington's moral superiority, however, combined with the possibly "catastrophic" results of failing to confront Munich-type threats, also justifies a range of extraordinary responses which, under other circumstances, might be morally questionable, according to the neo-con view. In particular, temporary alliances with other countries or movements whose own ideologies or practices may be morally reprehensible can be defended if they are used to fight a greater evil.

"In World War II, we were allied for three years and eight months with history's greatest murderer - Joseph Stalin - because we had a more immediate problem, Adolf Hitler," said former Central Intelligence Agency head James Woolsey, at an AEI briefing, in defending tactical flexibility. Similarly, neo-cons were unabashed about their support for "authoritarian" governments during the Cold War in the face of the greater "totalitarian" threat of Soviet communism, described by long-time Commentary editor Norman Podhoretz in 1976 as nothing less than "the most determined, ferocious and barbarous [enemy] ever to have appeared on the Earth".

The readiness to make tactical alliances has extended even to anti-Semitic governments and movements, such as the neo-Nazi military junta in Argentina. The regime was strongly defended by the elder Kristol, while neo-cons in the Ronald Reagan administration, such as Abrams and then-UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, worked to reverse the regime's diplomatic isolation and restore US and multilateral aid that had been cut off by previous president Jimmy Carter. The embrace was motivated primarily by the desire for Argentine cooperation in Central America, as was the neo-cons' strong support for then-Nicaraguan Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo despite his public stated beliefs that the Jews were punished for killing Jesus Christ.

Although anti-Semitism can apparently be tolerated under some circumstances, the security of Israel remains a fundamental tenet of neo-conservatives, who traditionally supported whatever Israeli government was in power but, since 1993 and the Oslo peace accords, became much more closely identified with the views of the right-wing Likud Party, which opposed the agreement. The neo-conservative identification with Israel can be explained in part by its predominantly Jewish membership, but Christian neo-conservatives very much share the sense that a strategic alliance with Israel constitutes a moral imperative in the post-Holocaust era. As Catholic neo-con

William Bennett wrote in a recent book, "America's fate and Israel's fate are one and the same."

This commitment to Israel also explains the willingness of Jewish neo-cons to overlook the anti-Semitism of their Christian Right allies, whose own identification with Israel is based on a "Christian Zionist" reading of Biblical scripture that recognizes a God-given right of the Jews to what both religions consider the "Holy Land", at least until the Apocalypse and the Second Coming of Christ. Kristol and other leading neo-cons have long argued that other Jews should not be offended by this alliance. "Why would it be a problem for us?" he wrote some years ago. "It is their theology; but it is our Israel."