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The Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War: Neoconservatives Versus Realists

BRIAN C. SCHMIDT and MICHAEL C. WILLIAMS

The aim of this article is to contribute to our understanding of both the debate over the war in Iraq and its implications for the future of U.S. foreign policy by examining the relationship between neoconservatism and realism. The article begins by establishing the connection between the tenets of neoconservatism and the arguments for war against Iraq. The primary focus is on the neoconservative Bush Doctrine that served as the primary justification for the Iraq War. Next, we turn to the arguments that realists put forth in their attempt to steer America away from the road to war. The realists, however, proved to be unsuccessful in their attempt to prevent war and in the final section we address the central question of the article; why did realism fail in the debate over Iraq?

As instability continues to prevail and the security situation worsens, not only in Iraq but in the entire Gulf region, intellectuals, politicians, and the informed public are belatedly searching for an explanation as to why the United States decided to venture down the road of regime change in Baghdad. With mounting costs and casualties, an increasingly sceptical public is asking how the United States ever became stuck in Iraq with no real plausible exit strategy. Doubt about President Bush's repeated claim that Iraq is the central front in the global war on terror is exacerbated by the fact that

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almost all of his administration's official reasons for the war have proven to be patently false, and by the even more worrying fact that the reordering of the Middle East that was claimed would follow from deposing Saddam Hussein may well be coming true, but in ways almost wholly at odds with those advertised by the war's proponents and with dire costs.

This situation has, unsurprisingly, given rise to intense scrutiny of not only the initial rationale for war, but the political dynamics which led to the policy's formulation and execution. The focus of much of this reexamination has been neoconservatism. If at the beginning of the Bush presidency there was a general failure in the academic community to appreciate the influence that neoconservatism had on American foreign policy, there is today a torrent of literature and documentaries illustrating how in the days after 9/11 neo-conservatives were able to steer America's response to the terrorist attacks in the direction of an invasion of Iraq.¹ At the same time, as the situation in Iraq has worsened, there has been an increasing appeal to realism as an alternative to neoconservatism. This appeal is strengthened by the fact that although by no means all realists opposed the administration's policy, realists were some of the most vocal critics of the move toward war and many attempted to play an important role in the debate over whether it was in the American national interest to remove Saddam Hussein from power by invading Iraq. This was most visible in a paid advertisement that appeared in the *New York Times* before the campaign to overthrow the Baathist regime began on 20 March 2003 in which many prominent realist scholars openly made the case against using military force against Iraq. They argued, quite simply, that war with Iraq was not in America's national interest.²

This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of both the debate over the war in Iraq and its implications for the future of U.S. foreign policy by examining the relationship between neoconservatism and realism. We proceed in three parts. In the first part of the paper we seek to establish the connection that exists between the core tenets of neoconservatism and the arguments for war against Iraq that were put forth by Bush administration officials. These links are most apparent when we turn our attention to the neoconservative Bush Doctrine that served as the primary justification for the Iraq War.

In the second part of the paper we turn to the arguments that realists put forth in their attempt to steer America away from the road to war. We recognize that realism is a theoretically broad category with numerous distinctions and variations. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a number of core assumptions shared by nearly all international relations scholars who identify themselves as realists. Michael Doyle, for example, describes realists as "the theorists of the 'state of war'" who adopt three core assumptions: first,

¹ Among the most interesting is Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

² See "War with Iraq is Not in America's National Interest," *New York Times*, paid advertisement, 26 September 2002.

international politics takes place in a condition of anarchy; second, the main actors are independent sovereign states that recognize no higher power; and third, that “the lack of a legitimate international source of controlling authority means no restraint—whether moral, social, cultural, economic, or political—is sufficiently strong or general either to eliminate completely or to manage reliably conflicts of interest, prestige, or value.”³ For many, it will seem counterintuitive that realists, unlike neoconservatives, were opposed to the Iraq War. After all, realist theory is often depicted as presenting a deeply pessimistic account of international politics in which all actors are compelled to seek power in order to ensure their own survival and security. Because there is always the chance that any particular state may resort to force, realists maintain that war is an ever-present possibility in an anarchical environment.⁴

Realists are indeed pessimistic about the prospects for a drastic improvement in the condition of international politics, but they are nevertheless cautious about the use of military force. In the case of Iraq, realists did not believe that the situation in 2003 warranted the use of force. Neoconservatives, on the other hand, were greatly displeased with the outcome of the Persian Gulf War and began a lobbying campaign for the United States to use armed force to remove Hussein from power.⁵ For example, members of the Project for a New American Century, which included influential neoconservatives such as William Kristol, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Lewis “Scooter” Libby, sent an open letter to President Clinton in January 1998 advocating a military strategy of regime change in Iraq.⁶

Yet, in the end, the realists proved to be unsuccessful in their attempt to prevent war and their arguments gained little traction in the debate that preceded the decision to invade Iraq. In part three, we address the central question of the article; why did realism fail in the debate over Iraq? There is no doubt, as many observers have argued, that the extraordinary circumstances following the attacks of 9/11 and the influential positions of neoconservatives within the Bush administration were important in marginalizing the arguments of both realists and other critics of the decision to go to war in 2003. However, a crucial and under-recognized part of the puzzle also lies in the

³ Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 45.

⁴ While all realists recognize that war is an ever-present possibility, some realists are more pessimistic than others. Defensive realists such as Kenneth Waltz appear to be less pessimistic than offensive realists such as John Mearsheimer about the prospects of avoiding interstate war. See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001); and Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security* 19 (Winter 1994–95), 50–90.

⁵ The neoconservatives’ displeasure with the outcome of the Persian Gulf War and their effort to get the United States to remove Hussein from power is chronicled in Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶ See “Open Letter to President Clinton: Remove Saddam From Power,” in Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf, eds., *The Iraq War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

ways that neoconservatives were able to deploy an intellectual framework and political rhetoric that drew upon powerful currents in American political culture and provided links to supportive and influential political constituencies, through which realist opposition to the policies of the administration could be countered. Mobilizing these symbolic and political resources, neoconservatives sought to deflect or neutralize realist arguments against going to war in Iraq and were at the same time able to develop a critique of realist analyses and alternatives that played an important role in the intense debates during the run up to the conflict.⁷

Recognizing these elements of the confrontation between realists and neoconservatives is important not only for explaining aspects of the past, but also has implications for the future. As the situation in Iraq has worsened, the neoconservative position has certainly taken a beating. The results of the midterm elections, the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld, and the reemergence of identifiably realist figures and ideas in the Iraq Study Group all seem to herald a return of the influence of realism and, in some eyes, the end of the “neoconservative moment.” However, the debate over the war on Iraq may yield other and, for realists, rather less comfortable and comforting lessons about its ability to influence the politics of American foreign policy. Seen in this light, the lessons of the debate over the war in Iraq have only begun to be appreciated.

NEOCONSERVATISM AND THE IRAQ WAR

The neoconservative vision of American foreign policy provided the theoretical and policy content of the Bush Doctrine, which in turn underpinned the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and depose the leadership of Saddam Hussein. Although hardly himself a neutral observer, Charles Krauthammer’s declaration that “the Bush doctrine is, essentially, a synonym for neoconservative foreign policy” is one that commands widespread assent across the political spectrum.⁸ While there has been a good deal of analysis of the Bush Doctrine, particularly on the question of whether or not it represents an abrupt and unprecedented shift in American foreign policy, it is revealing to extract its essential elements.⁹ This is a particularly useful exercise for showing how the core elements of the neoconservative Bush Doctrine stand in direct contrast to many of the fundamental tenets of realism.

⁷ For important recent contributions to the analysis of rhetoric, power, and foreign policy, see Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Jackson, “Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric,” *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 3 (2007): 35–66; and from a different perspective, Lene Hansen, *Security As Practice* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁸ Charles Krauthammer, “The Neoconservative Convergence,” *Commentary* (July–August 2005), 22.

⁹ For various interpretations of the Bush Doctrine, see John Lewis Gaddis, “Bush’s Security Strategy,” *Foreign Policy*, 133 (November/December 2002): 50–57; Andrew J. Bacevich, “Bush’s Grand Strategy,” *American Conservative* (4 November 2002); Melvyn P. Leffler, “Bush’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy* 144 (September/October 2004): 22–28; John G. Ikenberry, “America’s Imperial Ambition,” *Foreign Affairs*, 81 (September/October 2002): 44–60; and Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

The Bush Doctrine begins by embracing the notion that the United States is now the sole super power in the world and seeks to preserve its hegemonic position for the indefinite future. In President Bush's graduation speech at West Point in June 2002, he stated that "America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge—thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace."¹⁰ In his 17 September 2002 report on "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," Bush declared that "we [the United States] must build and maintain our defenses beyond challenge." He continued "our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States."¹¹ Neoconservatives view American omnipotence and leadership as a prerequisite for an orderly and peaceful world. William Kristol and Robert Kagan declare that "American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order."¹² A preponderance of American power is held to be beneficial to both the United States and the rest of the world, and, as Robert Jervis argues, the commitment by the United States to establish American hegemony, primacy, or empire is the element of the Bush Doctrine that ties all of the others together.¹³ It is worth mentioning that the neoconservatives' adherence to a grand strategy of primacy predates President Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy and West Point speech.¹⁴ In March 1992, a U.S. grand strategy of primacy that aimed to "prevent the emergence of a new rival" was outlined in a secret five-year Defense Planning Guidance paper that was leaked to the press. The primary author of the paper was Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who was then serving under Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney during the George H. W. Bush administration.¹⁵

In their advocacy of American hegemony, neoconservatives express their theoretical antipathy to traditional balance-of-power politics. A hegemonic

¹⁰ See George W. Bush, "Remarks at the 2002 Graduation Exercise of the United States Military Academy," West Point, New York, 1 June 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>.

¹¹ See *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, Washington, DC, September 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>.

¹² William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (July/August 1996), 23.

¹³ Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," in Demetrios James Caraley ed., *American Hegemony: Preventive War, Iraq and Imposing Democracy* (New York: The Academy of Political Science, 2004), 14.

¹⁴ Christopher Layne, for example, argues that the United States' pursuit of hegemony has been evident since 1940 and continues to guide America's grand strategy today. See Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ For additional information about the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance paper, see David Callahan, *Between Two Worlds: Realism, Idealism, and American Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 90–94; Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, 145–6; and Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop," *New York Times* (8 March 1992), A1.

order led by the United States is viewed as clearly superior to a balance-of-power order.¹⁶ Rather than a prescription for peace, as most realists maintain, neoconservatives view balance-of power politics as both unnecessary and a hindrance to achieving American national interests, while America's preeminent position in the world obviates the need for traditional balance-of-power diplomacy. Seeing American power as essentially benign, they argue that it is unnecessary for other countries to be concerned about the global imbalance of power and conclude that a return to a multipolar balance-of-power would be a direct threat to both American security interests and international order. In rejecting balance-of-power politics, John Mearsheimer argues that neoconservatives instead "believe that international politics operate according to 'bandwagoning' logic."¹⁷ According to this logic, rather than attempting to check the power of a more powerful state, weaker states actually join forces with it. As Mearsheimer explains, the underlying assumption of bandwagoning "is that if a state is badly outgunned by a rival, it makes no sense to resist its demands, because the adversary will take what it wants by force anyway and inflict considerable punishment in the process."¹⁸ Thus rather than challenging the United States, neoconservatives believe that threatened states and smaller powers will join forces with, and jump on, the American bandwagon. In advocating the war, for instance, Robert Kagan and William Kristol concluded that "once Iraq and Turkey—two of the three most important Middle Eastern powers—are both in the pro-western camp, there is a reasonable chance that smaller powers might decide to jump on the bandwagon."¹⁹ As we will see, this view is supplemented by a specific vision of the nature of American power as representing a force of democratization that all people desire and will support if only they are given the opportunity to do so (by, for example, the removal of oppressive political regimes). Bandwagoning, in this sense, is seen as a moral-political process as well as a military-strategic calculation, and this outlook provided neoconservatives with yet another rationale for invading Iraq.

The second element of the Bush Doctrine is the commitment, when the circumstances warrant, to the preemptive use of military force.²⁰ The

¹⁶ On the differences between a hegemonic and balance-of-power order, see G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

¹⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq War: Realism versus Neo-Conservatism," www.openDemocracy.net, posted 19 May 2005, 2.

¹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 163.

¹⁹ Robert Kagan and William Kristol, "What To Do About Iraq," in *The Iraq War Reader*, eds. Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 247.

²⁰ While the Bush administration has articulated a doctrine of preemption and attempted to cast the invasion of Iraq in terms of a preemptive war, perhaps in the vain attempt to acquire legal legitimacy as some international lawyers argue that the right to self-defense allows states to strike first if they are facing an imminent threat, in actuality the United States launched a preventive war as the threat that Iraq posed was a distant one at best. For a good general discussion of the differences between preventive and preemptive war, see Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Jack S. Levy, "Preventive War and the Bush Doctrine: Theoretical Logic and Historical Roots,"

policy of preemption is perhaps the most controversial element of the Bush Doctrine and, because of the profound implications of the policy, it has received the lion's share of attention.²¹ In light of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Bush administration depicted a threat environment radically different from that which existed during the Cold War. The most worrisome threats were deemed to be rogue states and terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). 9/11 had dramatically shown the willingness of terrorists to inflict large-scale destruction and death on American soil. In the climate of fear that existed after 9/11, and intentionally inflamed by neoconservative pundits appearing on MSNBC and Fox News, scenarios of rogue states or terrorists armed with WMD were deemed unacceptable by Bush administration officials.²² Bush judged it necessary to eliminate such threats before they fully materialized in the form of a mushroom cloud over Los Angeles or Manhattan. The 2002 National Security Strategy declares "we must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends. . . . We must deter and defend against the threat before it is unleashed."²³

In addition to justifying preemption on the basis of preventing the nightmare scenario of WMD being used on American soil from becoming reality, there was the argument that the traditional methods of deterrence and containment were no longer credible when it came to rogue states and terrorists. John Ikenberry explains that the neoconservatives' argument was that terrorists and the regimes that support them "cannot be deterred because they are either willing to die for their cause or able to escape retaliation."²⁴ According to the 2002 National Security Strategy, "traditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy whose avowed tactics are wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents; whose so-called soldiers seek martyrdom in death and whose most potent protection is statelessness."²⁵ While the policy of preemption does indeed have radical implications for the prevailing rules and norms regarding the use of force, especially those embodied in the United Nations Charter, it is important to recall that during the Cold War many

in Stanley A. Renshon and Peter Suedfeld, eds. *Understanding the Bush Doctrine: Psychology and Strategy in an Age of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2007).

²¹ See, for example, Richard Falk, "The New Bush Doctrine," *The Nation* (15 July 2002).

²² For an interesting account of how the neoconservatives used the media to help create a general climate of fear and inflame public opinion, see Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, 182–200; Douglas Kellner, *From 9/11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); and, more broadly, Stuart Croft, *Culture, Crisis, and America's War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). On the role that threat inflation played in selling the war to the American people, see Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 5–48.

²³ See *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, Washington, DC, September 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>.

²⁴ Ikenberry, "America's Imperial Ambition," 49.

²⁵ See *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, Washington, DC, September 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>.

neoconservatives never fully supported the policy of deterrence. Several of the neoconservatives in the Bush administration advocating preemption and preventive war were influenced by Albert Wohlstetter's critiques of the policy of nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction (MAD) and his advocacy of a much more forceful policy toward the Soviet Union, including plans to fight and win a nuclear war.²⁶ The National Security Strategy claims the doctrine of preemptive war is not unprecedented, and the United States has always maintained the option of using force to prevent threats to its national security. To forestall new and emerging threats, Bush announced that the United States would not remain idle, but rather would, "if necessary, act preemptively."

The third element of the Bush Doctrine is a unilateralism that follows logically from the previous two elements. A commitment to the maintenance of a unipolar international system and to the doctrine of preemption is unilateralist to the core. As evidenced by the inability of the United States to attain a Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq, it is extremely difficult to get a consensus on the preemptive use of force. Yet the behavior of the Bush administration indicates that they did not perceive this to be a significant obstacle or problem. In addition to the neoconservatives' criticism of President Clinton's failure to remove Saddam Hussein from power, they were also highly critical of his multilateral approach to foreign policy.²⁷ Unipolar powers, neoconservatives argue, do not need to act multilaterally; they have the option of acting unilaterally. Bush's preference to act in a unilateral manner was evident before 9/11. In a short period of time, the Bush administration rejected a number of international agreements including the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol, the protocol implementing the ban on biological weapons, and withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia.

The most striking example of the administration's willingness to proceed unilaterally, of course, was its decision to defy the will of much of the international community, including the UN Security Council, and invade Iraq.²⁸ Notwithstanding all of the extra burdens that the United States has had to endure because of its inability to convince its allies of the merits of overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime, Robert Jervis points out that there were, ironically enough, some advantages to the broad opposition to its plan, since "it gave the United States the opportunity to demonstrate that it would override strenuous objections from allies if this was necessary to reach its goals."²⁹ Apparently even Saddam Hussein was surprised by the United

²⁶ For more on the influence of Wohlstetter, see Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, 61–64.

²⁷ See Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Where Is Our Foreign Policy?" *Washington Post*, 30 July 1993; and Paul D. Wolfowitz, "Clinton's First Year," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 1994): 28–43.

²⁸ President Bush's claim to have assembled a broad coalition of states is dubious at best. Among the states included in the so-called coalition were Bulgaria, El Salvador, Eritrea, Iceland, Kuwait, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Rwanda, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and the United Kingdom.

²⁹ Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," 13.

States' willingness to act unilaterally and circumvent the UN.³⁰ A key reason for the neoconservatives' confidence in pursuing a go-it-alone strategy in Iraq was their steadfast faith in the power of the American military. Like many others, they were captivated by the United States' massive display of military prowess in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. When Bush entered the oval office, the United States unquestionably possessed the most powerful military in the world.³¹ Neoconservatives argued that the United States should use its military power to reorder the international system to suit America's own national interests, and as Halper and Clarke have argued, "from its early beginnings, a proclivity toward the use of force has been an identifying badge of the neo-conservative ideology."³²

In addition to their belief in the utility of military force, the neoconservatives who surrounded Bush were strong proponents of what has been termed the revolution in military affairs (RMA). As Mearsheimer has pointed out, the neoconservatives "believed that the United States could rely on stealth technology, air-delivered precision-guided weapons, and small but highly mobile ground forces to win quick and decisive victories."³³ Given their penchant for unilateral action, fascination with military power, and faith in the RMA to achieve political objectives, it is hardly surprising that neoconservatives were confident that the United States could quickly, efficiently, and affordably achieve regime change in Iraq—a claim which in terms of conventional force-on-force operations seems largely to have been confirmed, even as its limitations in reconstruction, occupation, or asymmetric contexts have been cruelly exposed.

The final element of the Bush Doctrine, and one that is deeply embedded in the history of American foreign policy, is democracy promotion. Mearsheimer characterizes the neoconservative Bush Doctrine as "Wilsonianism with teeth." He explains that "the theory has an idealist strand and a power strand: Wilsonianism provides the idealism, an emphasis on military power provides the teeth."³⁴ As many observers of American foreign policy have noted, there is a widespread conviction among policy makers that the United States economic and security interests are advanced by the spread of liberal values and democratic institutions abroad.³⁵ Neoconservatives fully

³⁰ See Kevin Woods, James Lacey, and Williamson Murray, "Saddam's Delusions: The View from Inside," *Foreign Affairs* 85 (May/June 2006).

³¹ The impressive extent of American military capabilities are discussed in Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003).

³² Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, 26.

³³ Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq War," 2.

³⁴ Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq War," 1.

³⁵ See Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry, and Takashi Inoguchi, eds., *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, and Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); C. Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, and Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security* 29, no. 4 (Spring 2005).

embody this belief and strongly support the notion that American foreign policy should actively, and at times forcefully, work to spread democracy. According to Charles Krauthammer, for example, “with the decline of communism, the advancement of democracy should become the touchstone of a new ideological American foreign policy.”³⁶ By embracing democracy as the universally best form of government, and by committing themselves to spreading democracy across the globe, neoconservatives are in important respects the heirs of Wilsonian liberalism. While some, like Francis Fukuyama, assume a steady and irreversible march toward democracy, other neoconservatives advocate a much more proactive program.

Indeed, Iraq was intended to be merely the first step in the eventual regional democratization of the entire Middle East. After years of supporting authoritarian, monarchical governments, the Bush administration abruptly determined that democracy was the remedy to all of the ills, especially the rise of terrorism, plaguing the Middle East. One of the justifications for invading Iraq rested on the claim that by removing the dictator Saddam Hussein, democracy would bloom in Iraq. In the case of Iraq, the task was not judged to be overly difficult. Just as democracy flourished in Eastern Europe after one dictator after another was removed from power following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the same result was predicted for Iraq. Informed by a liberal view of international relations, democracy promotion in Iraq was deemed to be a valid goal of American foreign policy. A democratic Iraq, it was argued, would result in a dramatic change in its foreign policy and would remove the terrorist threat that was (erroneously) argued to emanate from Baghdad. Moreover, democracy in Iraq, according to the neoconservatives, would have a transformative effect on the entire Middle East. In President Bush’s 2003 speech to the National Endowment for Democracy, he declared “Iraqi democracy will succeed—and that success will send forth news, from Damascus to Tehran—that freedom can be the future of every nation.”³⁷ Promoting democracy and freedom in the Islamic world, by force if necessary, was viewed as a crucial element of the overall strategy of countering radical extremism and terror. Not only would a campaign for democracy help to eliminate the terrorist threat to the United States, but it would also help to transform the Middle East into a democratic zone of peace that would be beneficial to the region in general and America’s strategic ally, Israel, in particular.

Collectively, these four elements of the Bush Doctrine provided a powerful rationale for invading Iraq. When viewed along with the Bush Doctrine,

³⁶ Charles Krauthammer, “Universal Dominion: Toward a Unipolar World,” *National Interest* (Winter 1989/90), 47.

³⁷ See President George W. Bush, remarks at the celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy United States Chamber of Commerce, Washington, DC, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>.

the administration's argument that the invasion of Iraq was a key element of its global war on terror was accepted by a large segment of the American public, including the United States Congress. When joined together with the specific arguments advanced by key neoconservatives, both inside and outside the Bush administration, about Iraq's alleged possession of WMD, defiance of UN Security Council resolutions, previous reckless behavior, and the imminent threat it posed to the United States, the momentum for war was all but unstoppable. Whenever the opportunity arose, neoconservatives, especially Dick Cheney, never tired of making the link between the 9/11 terrorist attack and Iraq.³⁸ They portrayed a picture to the American public of Saddam Hussein as a serial aggressor who could not be allowed to possess WMD. They propagated an interpretation of Iraq's previous behavior under Saddam Hussein as inherently aggressive and expansionistic. Often drawing on the analogy to Hitler, the neoconservatives advanced the argument that Hussein's Iraq could neither be contained nor deterred from using its alleged WMD. In the general climate of fear that existed after 9/11 and armed with a half-baked strategic plan, the neoconservatives led the United States to war with Iraq.³⁹

REALISM AND THE IRAQ WAR

Many realist scholars never accepted the arguments advanced by the neoconservatives. In response to the administration's growing moves toward invasion, a number of American realists attempted to enter the public debate and make the case that it was unwise for the United States to choose war with Iraq. Not only did they foresee a host of problems that would likely

³⁸ Our analysis of American foreign policy and the decision to invade Iraq does not rest on the specific roles played by individual neoconservatives in the Bush administration. Nevertheless it is valid to ask whether Vice President Cheney, who tirelessly argued that Saddam Hussein represented a grave threat to the United States and played a major role in advocating regime change, is a neoconservative. Neoconservatism is itself, of course, a very broad "persuasion," to use Irving Kristol's description. With this said, we think the evidence indicates that Cheney is closely associated with the position of the neoconservatives, at least as an "implementer" if not an "originator" of their ideas. See Michael Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/08). Cheney's signature can be found on the "1997 Statement of Principles of the Project for a New American Century," <http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm>. Charles Krauthammer identifies George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, and Donald Rumsfeld as "the current practitioners of neoconservative foreign policy." See Krauthammer, "The Neoconservative Convergence," 26. For additional discussion of this issue, see Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*; David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals* (New York: Touchstone, 2002); and James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of the Bush War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004). By contrast, Cheney is labeled a realist in Anatol Lieven's thoughtful *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), which illustrates the difficulties in cut-and-dried categorizations.

³⁹ See Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*; Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*; and Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

accompany the United States' occupation of the country, but they also found it unnecessary and counterproductive to invade Iraq.⁴⁰ Realists argued that the invasion of Iraq would direct attention away from dealing with the real terrorist threat posed by al Qaeda, including the search for Osama bin Laden and the campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan. As we expound below, realists argued that Iraq could be contained, thus making war unnecessary. In this section, we first lay out the realist critique of the main elements of the Bush Doctrine, since it provided the key rationale for the Iraq War. We then examine how realists attempted to counter the specific arguments that neo-conservatives and the Bush administration made for going to war with Iraq.

To the extent that neoconservatism embraces a liberal theory of international relations, it is not surprising that many realists view the Bush Doctrine as a recipe for disaster. Since at least the time of Hans J. Morgenthau, realists have been fierce critics of the tendency of the United States to engage in moralistic foreign policy crusades to remake the world in its own image. The grand project of spreading democracy to the Middle East on the basis of alleged universal liberal principles is simply the latest example of a moralistic and crusading spirit in American foreign policy. While neoconservatives want to imbue the key concept of the American national interest with universal moral principles and values, classical realists such as Morgenthau and George Kennan argued that this is precisely what led to so many of the United States' foreign policy blunders.⁴¹ The national interest, according to Morgenthau, must be derived from the specific interests of the United States, which at a minimum are to protect its "physical, political, and cultural identity against encroachments by other nations,"⁴² and while never denying that realism had to embrace moral and political values, he stressed that the national interest must also be commensurate with the power available to the United States. Morgenthau struggled throughout his career to convince American foreign policy officials of the dangers of conceptualizing the national interest in universalistic moral terms. In 1947, he wrote "a foreign policy based upon a moral principle, which by definition relegates the national interest to the background (if it does not neglect it altogether) is of necessity a policy of national suicide, actual or potential."⁴³ With respect to the liberal Wilsonian

⁴⁰ "War With Iraq is Not in America's National Interest." Paid advertisement, 26 September 2002. For a general overview of some of the key realist views of the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, such as those of John J. Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, Christopher Preble, Daryl G. Press, Stephen Walt, and Kenneth N. Waltz, see Paul Starobin, "The Realists," *National Journal* 39, no. 37 (16 September 2006): 24–31.

⁴¹ See Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951); and George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁴² Hans J. Morgenthau, "Another 'Great Debate': The National Interest of the United States," *American Political Science Review* 46 (December 1952), 972.

⁴³ Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Primacy of the National Interest," *The American Scholar* (vol. 18, no. 2, Spring 1949), 10.

project of spreading democracy, Morgenthau perceptively observed “it is obvious that no statesmen could pursue without discrimination such a policy of universal democracy without courting disaster; commitments would outrun resources and failure would ensue.”⁴⁴ For Morgenthau, the contrast between the national interest, on the one hand, and morals, on the other, was a false dichotomy. As he viewed it, “the choice is not between moral principles and the national interest, devoid of moral dignity, but between one set of moral principles divorced from political reality, and another set of moral principles derived from political reality.”⁴⁵

Although Bush and the neoconservatives wholeheartedly embrace the liberal premise that democracies have distinctive foreign policies and exercise peaceful restraint in their relations with other democracies, structural realists have been fierce critics of the so-called democratic peace thesis.⁴⁶ As Mearsheimer observes, “the neo-conservatives’ theory of international politics focuses on promoting democracy, which they believe is the most powerful ideology on the face of the earth.” He adds, they also “believe that the world divides into good states and bad states, and that the democracies are the white hats.”⁴⁷ In contrast to theorists of the democratic peace, structural realists argue instead that systemic pressures force all states, democracies and nondemocracies alike, to act in a similar manner.⁴⁸ Christopher Layne explains, “international political behaviour is characterized by continuity, regularity, and repetition because states are constrained by the international system’s unchanging (and probably unchangeable) structure.”⁴⁹ In this manner, a change in the character of the units (states) is unlikely to change the nature of international politics. Realists also call into question the neoconservatives’ pristine account of the history of American foreign policy behavior and the notion of “American exceptionalism.” While often portrayed as standing for good over evil, the history of American foreign policy, including its relationship to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, provides plenty of examples of ruthless and less than moral behavior. Not only do realists dispute the notion that the internal character of a regime determines its external behavior, but they are also extremely dubious that the United States has the capabilities, know-how, and perseverance to bring about democracy in Iraq or any other

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁵ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 33.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Christopher Layne, “Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace,” *International Security* 19 (Fall 1994): 5–49 and Sebastian Rosato, “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (November 2003): 585–602.

⁴⁷ Mearsheimer, “Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq War,” 3.

⁴⁸ The seminal work is by Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

⁴⁹ Christopher Layne, “Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace,” in *Debating the Democratic Peace*, eds. Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 162.

state in the world. As many have noted, the United States does not have a strong track record of successful nation-building.

In contrast to neoconservatism's claim that democracy is the most powerful ideology in the world, realists have stressed the power of nationalism. Despite the fact that nationalism was strongly visible during the Vietnam War and is clearly evident today in the lethal insurgency underway in Iraq, the neoconservatives who planned the attack on Iraq simply discounted its potential impact, choosing instead to fancifully believe that the United States' armed forces would be greeted as liberators. Realists who emphasize nationalism warned of the dangers of invading a multiethnic Middle Eastern state, and they have largely been vindicated. One could argue that the first Bush administration understood the dangers of occupying Iraq and thus prudently ended the war once the objective of liberating Kuwait was met. With the hindsight of the Cold War, Mearsheimer notes "realists thought from the start that it was foolish in the age of nationalism to think that the United States could invade and occupy Iraq and other countries in the middle east for the purpose of altering their political systems in ways that would make them friendly to America."⁵⁰

Realists strongly disagreed with the neoconservatives' assertion that, following the invasion of Iraq, other countries would seek either to align themselves with the United States or reform their domestic political system to suit America's liking. Stephen Walt, for example, holds that by employing bandwagoning logic, neoconservatives incorrectly argued "that displays of power and resolve by the United States will discourage further resistance and lead more and more states to conclude that it is time to get on our side."⁵¹ Realists do not believe that states are inclined to bandwagon because it actually entails conceding power to a rival state, which they argue is never a good idea in the self-help anarchical international system.⁵² Rather than living in a bandwagoning world, as neoconservatives believe, realists, according to Mearsheimer, "tend to believe that we live in a balancing world, in which, when one state puts its fist in another state's face, the target usually does not throw its hands in the air and surrender. Instead, it looks for ways to defend itself; it balances against the threatening state."⁵³

Thus rather than other so-called rogue states, including the other two members of the axis of evil—Iran and North Korea, capitulating to the United States, many realists argued that if Iraq was invaded by American forces these states would likely redouble their efforts to deter an invasion or attack. Not surprisingly for these realists, the most likely means of attaining the ability

⁵⁰ Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq War," 4.

⁵¹ Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (W. W. Norton, 2005) 184.

⁵² There are, however, some exceptions. See Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning For Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994).

⁵³ Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq War," 4.

to deter the United States from attacking would be the acquisition of nuclear weapons. As we now know, the United States' use of military power to rid Iraq of Saddam Hussein did not result in either North Korea or Iran appeasing the United States and jumping on the American bandwagon. Instead, both remain defiant. The latter appears intent on acquiring the capability to build a nuclear weapon; and it would take quite an extraordinary leap to see recent progress in the North Korean case as a direct result of the fraught situation in Iraq. Although the remnants of the Iraqi army proved to be no match against the American military armed with the latest RMA technology, United States forces have been bogged down and dealing with a destructive and lethal insurgency, a situation that was also largely foreseen by realists such as Michael Desch and Barry Posen who issued an advance warning about the difficulties of urban warfare.⁵⁴ As Mearsheimer sees it, realism quickly unravels the neoconservatives' faulty logic and explains the current reality of the Iraq situation: "in short, occupation stokes nationalism, which leads to insurgency, which undermines any hope of making bandwagoning logic work, which undermines big-stick diplomacy."⁵⁵

Since realists argue that international politics operates according to balance-of-power logic, they also contest the neoconservatives' argument that a grand strategy of primacy or empire is obviously attainable or advantageous for the United States.⁵⁶ While a few realists have endorsed hegemony as a superior form of international order and advocated that the United States pursue a grand strategy of primacy to maintain the current unipolar system, most realists dismiss this as simply unrealistic.⁵⁷ Quite simply, "in a unipolar distribution of power, balance-of-power realism makes a clear prediction: weaker states will resist and balance against the predominant state."⁵⁸ Even though the logic of offensive realism dictates that hegemony is the best—that is, the most secure—position for a state, Mearsheimer argues that it is simply unattainable and strategies that attempt to achieve it are ultimately self-defeating.⁵⁹ Layne concurs, arguing that the attempt "to maintain U.S. hegemony is self-defeating because it will provoke other states to balance against the United States, and result in the depletion of America's relative

⁵⁴ See Michael C. Desch, "Know Thy Enemy," *American Conservative* (16 December 2002); and Barry Posen, "Battling for Baghdad," *New York Times* (13 October 2002).

⁵⁵ Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq War," 5.

⁵⁶ On the perils of empire, see the statement of principles by the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy, <http://www.realisticforeignpolicy.org/static/000027.php>.

⁵⁷ On the debate about unipolarity, see G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* (vol. 81, no. 4, July/August 2002): 20–33; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*; and Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment," *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006).

⁵⁸ G. John Ikenberry, "Introduction," in ed. G. John Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 8.

⁵⁹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

power.”⁶⁰ In direct contrast with the neoconservatives, Mearsheimer argues “instead of building an empire—which will increase anti-American hatred and put U.S. forces on the front lines around the world—the United States should seek to reduce its military footprint and use force sparingly.”⁶¹

Neoconservatives and others have, however, argued that given the superior power advantage that the United States currently possesses, balance-of-power politics is hardly relevant today. They see no evidence that other states are even attempting to balance what they perceive to be the omnipotent, yet benevolent, power of the United States. Although it is impossible here to deal with the latest academic controversy about the status of the concept of the balance-of-power, it is revealing to consider Stephen Walt’s balance-of-threat theory as it adds another dimension to the realists’ critique of the neoconservatives’ argument for going to war with Iraq. Balance-of-threat theory, according to Walt, “argues that states form alliances to balance against *threats*. Threats, in turn, are a function of power, proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions.”⁶² Of crucial importance in the context of the neoconservative Bush Doctrine, which advocates the preventive use of force, is the widely shared perception around the world that not only does the United States possess a super-abundance of power, but it also has aggressive intentions. As Walt observes, “the war in Iraq reinforced global concerns about the unchecked nature of U.S. power.” By using “force against Iraq—in defiance of the Security Council and widespread global opposition,” Walt argues that more and more states began to view the problem of U.S. primacy in the following manner: “how can other states be comfortable and secure when U.S. decisions affect all of their interests, and when the United States is strong enough to act pretty much as it wishes?”⁶³

In this view, one of the ironies of the militaristic, aggressive, and unilateral nature of the Bush administration’s foreign policy is that it is actually encouraging other states to engage in balancing behavior against the United States.⁶⁴ The unipolar system that neoconservatives so desperately want to maintain is being undermined by their very own policies because, as Robert Pape argues “the Bush strategy of aggressive unilateralism is changing the United States’ long-enjoyed reputation for benign intent and giving other major powers reason to fear its power.”⁶⁵ As a direct consequence of this fear, Pape observes that states are adopting “‘soft-balancing’ measures: that

⁶⁰ Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing,” in eds. Michael E. Brown et al., *America’s Strategic Choices, Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 126.

⁶¹ John J. Mearsheimer, “Hearts and Minds,” *The National Interest* 69 (Fall 2002), 15.

⁶² Stephen M. Walt, “Keeping the World ‘Off-Balance,’” in *America Unrivaled*, 133.

⁶³ Walt, *Taming American Power*, 59–60.

⁶⁴ See Robert A. Pape, “Soft Balancing Against the United States,” *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 7–45 and T. V. Paul, “Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 46–71.

⁶⁵ Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States,” 9.

is, actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies.⁶⁶ Yet, this is exactly what Walt and other realists predicted would happen when the United States adopted a threatening, power-maximizing foreign policy. In addition to the balancing, soft or otherwise, that states have begun to undertake against the United States, the second negative effect of the Iraq War has been an incredibly sharp decline in the favorable opinion that others around the world have of the United States.⁶⁷ This greatly jeopardizes the ability of the United States to engage in successful diplomacy, which realists since Morgenthau have recognized to be a crucial component of state power.

We now turn to some of the specific critiques that realists made of neo-conservative justifications and arguments for going to war with Iraq. Most fundamentally, realists never accepted the argument that preventive war with Iraq was necessary because Saddam Hussein could not be contained. Realists argued that the United States could contain Iraq indefinitely and that the preventive use of military force to remove Saddam Hussein from power was inimical to the American national interest.⁶⁸ While neoconservatives portrayed Iraqi foreign policy under Saddam Hussein as overly-aggressive and expansionist, Mearsheimer and Walt argued that the historical record did not support such an interpretation. During the 30 years that Saddam was in power, Iraq only started two wars with its neighbors: Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990. Mearsheimer and Walt observe that “Saddam’s record in this regard is no worse than that of neighboring states such as Egypt or Israel, each of which played a role in starting several wars since 1948.”⁶⁹ Moreover, in the case of the Iran-Iraq War, the United States as well as many of the Arab states actually supported Iraq as the lesser of the two evils. In the case of Iraq’s attempt to annex Kuwait, Saddam Hussein had received a strong signal from the American Ambassador, April Glaspie, that the United States had no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts, including Iraq’s border dispute with Kuwait.⁷⁰ Mearsheimer and Walt conclude that a careful examination of the historical record “shows Saddam was neither mindlessly aggressive nor particularly reckless.”⁷¹

As we now know, the Bush administration’s justification that war with Iraq was necessary because it possessed large quantities of WMD has proved

⁶⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁷ See Walt, *Taming American Power*, chap. 4; and Stephen Brooks, *As Others See Us: The Causes and Consequences of Foreign Perceptions of America* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006).

⁶⁸ See “War with Iraq is Not in America’s National Interest,” *New York Times*, paid advertisement, 26 September 2002.

⁶⁹ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy* (January/February 2003), 52.

⁷⁰ See “The Glaspie Transcript: Saddam Meets the U.S. Ambassador,” in eds., Sifry and Cerf, *The Iraq War Reader*, 61–71.

⁷¹ Mearsheimer and Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” 54.

to be illusory. Yet even if Iraq did possess WMD, including nuclear weapons, Mearsheimer and Walt argued that the United States could have deterred Saddam Hussein from using them, thus making preventive war unnecessary. According to Mearsheimer and Walt, “the historical record shows that the United States can contain Iraq effectively—even if Saddam has nuclear weapons—just as it contained the Soviet Union during the Cold War.”⁷² While acknowledging that Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against the Kurds in Northern Iraq and Iran, Mearsheimer and Walt disagreed with the neoconservatives’ and Bush’s assessment that he would use them against the United States, since the calculus for using these types of weapons would be fundamentally different against an opponent such as the United States. Thus, while Iraq “could use chemical weapons against the Kurds and Iranians because they could not retaliate in kind,” this would not be the case with the United States, since it “can retaliate with overwhelming force, including weapons of mass destruction.” They add, “this is why Mr. Hussein did not use chemical or biological weapons against American forces or Israel during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.”⁷³

In the same manner that realists argued that Iraq could be deterred from using its alleged WMD, Mearsheimer and Walt also dismissed the notion that Saddam Hussein would hand off his WMD to groups such as al Qaeda, who could then use them against the United States. When realists examine the recent history of Iraqi foreign policy, they conclude that if there is one thing to be learned about Saddam Hussein, it is that he wanted to survive and remain in power. Handing off any type of WMD to terrorists intent on using them against the United States would have been one sure way for his reign to come to a quick end. Thus realists never supported the argument that war was necessary to prevent Saddam Hussein from slipping his WMD to terrorists. According to Mearsheimer and Walt, Hussein “would have little to gain and everything to lose since he could never be sure that American surveillance would not detect the handoff.” And “if it did, the United States response would be swift and devastating.”⁷⁴ To their credit, realists also rejected the idea that Saddam Hussein would handoff his WMD to terrorists such as al Qaeda, because they never accepted the Bush administration’s faulty charge that Iraq had anything to do with 9/11 or international terrorism for that matter.

Realists concluded that Iraq could be both deterred and contained; thus making preventive war unnecessary. They found all of the reasons that neoconservatives put forth to make their case that Iraq could neither be deterred nor contained to be baseless. Before the Iraq War started, Mearsheimer and Walt concluded “both logic and historical evidence suggest a policy of vigilant

⁷² Ibid., 52.

⁷³ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “Keeping Saddam Hussein in a Box,” *New York Times*, 2 February 2003.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

containment would work, both now and in the event Iraq acquires a nuclear arsenal.⁷⁵ Unlike neoconservatives, realists are cautious when it comes to the use of military force. Realists are aware of the profound costs, both in terms of human lives and dollars, that are associated with war. And unlike the neoconservatives and Bush administration officials who presented the most optimistic assessment of both the war and its consequences, realists warned of the potential dangers that could follow the United States' risky decision to launch a preventive war against Iraq.⁷⁶ Realists concluded that the fundamental national interest of the United States—that is, its physical security and survival as a political entity—was not at stake in March 2003. For realists, there was a clear alternative to preventive war against Iraq. That alternative was vigilant containment of a weakened Iraq. This alternative would have allowed the United States to concentrate on defeating al Qaeda and would have prevented the morass that it presently faces in Iraq and much of the world today.

NEOCONSERVATIVES VERSUS REALISTS

In light of the foregoing argument, one might be forgiven for seeing realists' role over the war in Iraq as akin to Hegel's Owl of Minerva, their wisdom only taking flight at dusk—when most of the damage has already been done. There certainly are visions of realism that see its fate in this essentially tragic vein. It may well be, moreover, that nothing could have changed the trajectory of events. There is little doubt that the sense of emergency following 9/11 contributed to the success of the policy agenda espoused by influential neoconservatives already securely ensconced in the halls of power. The shock of those events, as numerous analysts have pointed out, created a sense of urgency and dislocation that neoconservatism was able to fill with an almost ready-made response. The rapid fixing of the meaning of the attacks in public discourse certainly left the Bush administration policy well armoured against criticism and often so unfettered by significant political opposition that perhaps no arguments could have changed the direction of U.S. policy.⁷⁷ Hans Morgenthau may long ago have admonished realists to speak "truth to power" but, as Michael Cox has written in a fine essay on the theme, we should not assume that power will be listening.⁷⁸

We argue here, however, that the failure of realism in the debate over Iraq reveals more than just another tragic tale of its "timeless wisdom" being

⁷⁵ Mearsheimer and Walt, "An Unnecessary War," 59.

⁷⁶ See Christopher Layne, "The Post-Saddam Quagmire," *LA Weekly*, 20 March 2003.

⁷⁷ See Ronald R. Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz, "Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercions, and the Road to War in Iraq," *Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (July-September 2007): 409–45.

⁷⁸ Michael Cox, "Hans Morgenthau, Realism and the Cold War" in ed. Michael C. Williams, *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

cast aside. Instead, we suggest that to more fully understand these contests and their significance for realism it is necessary to see how the neoconservative intellectual and political movement sought and in many ways succeeded in configuring the debate over Iraq in ways that allowed it to deploy powerful intellectual, rhetorical, and political strategies—and to mobilize significant ideological and social resources that allowed it effectively to confront critics of its policies, including realists. By focusing less on the influence of individuals in positions of power, or on the shock of 9/11, and more on the broader social and ideational context in which these debates took place (and continue to some degree to take place), it is possible to gain a better understanding of the place of realism in these bitter controversies and the lessons they may teach about the relationship between ideas, political debate, and foreign policy.

Before turning to these strategies, it is worth pointing out two developments within the recent history of realism that abetted these neoconservative strategies. First, while the return of nationalism in realist explanations of neoconservative errors in Iraq marks a welcome resurgence of interest in the topic, we should not forget that for several decades in much of academic realism, the dual influence of rationalism and parsimony that came to define “structural” or neorealism by design left little place for the study of “unit-level” factors in academically respectable analysis. Realism’s rediscovery of nationalism should not, in other words, blind us to the fact that it was ideas about realism in this period (with some notable exceptions) that left little room for the intellectually respectable analysis of nationalism and patriotism—and in the process left this field open to largely uncontested exploitation by neoconservatives who did think long and hard about these questions and made them crucial parts of their analytic, rhetorical, and political platforms.

Second, and related to this, is the fact that nationalism and patriotism are at some level inescapably about values. This too may seem an obvious point. Yet it is again worth noting that many of the claims to legitimate social science that have been entwined with realism over the past three decades have involved a conscious marginalization of the discussion of values from serious discourse about international politics.⁷⁹ These developments left an intellectual and political space that neoconservatism was able to occupy and,

⁷⁹ Again, this is not to say that such issues were wholly missing in realism, especially if one goes back to earlier “classical” thinkers such as Morgenthau, Tucker, or Osgood, much less is it to say that realists do not have values. But one of the main elements in the transition to neorealism lay in a conscious move away from treating values in a systematic theoretical fashion in the name of an objective social science. For a broad analysis of realism’s move in this direction, see Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil, eds., *The Return of Culture and Identity in International Relations* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996). For recent attempts to reinvigorate the insights of classical realism see Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Michael C. Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and the overview in Brent Steele, “The Reflexive Realists,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* (forthcoming).

to some degree, dominate. While the lack of success of realism in the debates over Iraq cannot be reduced to this situation, it is crucial to understanding it, for in the run-up to the Iraq War, realists found themselves engaged in debates where these issues were of crucial importance.

One of the most revealing ways of approaching this contest is to look at the concept that realism has long claimed as its own: the national interest. That the debates over Iraq were cast in terms of competing claims about whether the policy of the Bush administration was in the national interest of the United States is scarcely surprising—virtually no foreign policy can fail to be framed at least partially within the parameters of this hardest of concepts. What was significant was the way that neoconservatives self-consciously sought to wrest the idea of the national interest from its realist moorings and indeed to turn it against their realist opponents. To see how this was accomplished, it is necessary to look briefly at the broader intellectual foundations of the neoconservative vision of the national interest.⁸⁰

The neoconservative critique of realism is not that it focuses on the national interest, but that realism has failed to take the concept of the national interest seriously enough. In contrast to many realist positions, the neoconservative vision of the national interest cannot be understood apart from its connections to a concern with the condition of domestic political life, and particularly with its concern with values and questions of social virtue. This not only sets it in opposition to much of realism, but also provides it with rhetorical and political resources crucial in its battle against realism.

At the core of neoconservatism is a specific reading of the politics of modernity, in which the concept of “interest” has a specific significance. In this view, while the pursuit of interests is acknowledged as one of the key elements in social life and its explanation, in addition to being an important value, the reduction of interest to narrow conceptions of self-interest characteristic of modern rationalism is seen as both analytically misleading and politically disastrous. A social order based purely on narrowly egoistic interests, neoconservatives argue, is unlikely to survive—and the closer one comes to it, the less liveable and sustainable society will become. Unable to generate a compelling vision of the collective public interest, such a society would be incapable of maintaining itself internally or defending itself externally. As a consequence, neoconservatism regards the ideas at the core of many forms of modern political and economic rationalism—that such a vision of interest can be the foundation for social order—as both wrong and

⁸⁰ For a wider analysis, see Michael C. Williams, “What is the National Interest?: The Neoconservative Challenge in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 11 (December 2005): 307–37. An extended essay that revealingly embodies many of the key themes of neoconservatism is Norman Podhoretz, “World War IV: How It Started, What It Means, And Why We Have To Win” in ed. G. Rosen, *The Right War?: The Conservative Debate On Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 102–69. A valuable recent treatment is Jean-Francois Drolet, “The Visible Hand of Neo-conservative Capitalism,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35, no. 2 (2007): 245–78.

dangerous. It is wrong because all functioning polities require some sense of shared values and common vision of the public interest in order to maintain themselves. It is dangerous because a purely egoistic conception of interest may actually contribute to the erosion of this sense of the public interest, and the individual habits of social virtue and commitment to common values that sustain it.

This broad theoretical perspective provides the foundation of the neo-conservative critique of realism. “Interests” in politics, they argue, cannot be understood separately from the values in relation to which they are constituted. At the level of foreign policy analysis, this means that the interests of states cannot be deduced wholly from their material power or their position within a particular international or regional order. Important as these factors may be, a full understanding of the interests and, thus, the actions of a particular state requires an appreciation of the values through which its interests are conceived.⁸¹ Without such an appreciation, foreign policy analysis will be badly limited, a failing they see as particularly characteristic of realism.

Yet the concern with the question of values—and its place in the neo-conservative critique of realism—goes beyond questions of foreign policy analysis. Neoconservatives argue that in its reduction of politics to the pursuit of interests, particularly material self-interest, realism is part of a broader trend of intellectual and political rationalism that is destructive of political order as a whole, and of the American political order in particular. In this way, realism is not simply wrong about foreign policy: it actually contributes to the erosion of the political order of the United States that it claims to defend.

Neoconservatism’s critique of realism in this vein develops along three reinforcing lines. First, neoconservatives argue that the endless debates and indeterminacy within realism over what the national interest is reflect more than just the complexities of judgment, which neoconservatives readily acknowledge. More fundamentally, they are the logical outcome of an approach to foreign policy severed from values and a deeper understanding of the national interest as a necessary expression of those values. As a result, realism suffers the fate of modern rationalism as a whole. It lacks any view beyond narrowly strategic material calculation, narrowly pragmatic judgment, or pluralist competition. This is not a resolution to the problem of the national interest in modern politics. It is a symptom of the decline

⁸¹ As William Kristol argues, for example, although “material interests and geographical and historical characteristics of nations” are important, “the nature of a regime is crucial, rather than some alleged underlying, geographically or economically or culturally determined ‘national interest.’ The priority of the political order implies a morally informed American foreign policy.” “The members of the president’s foreign-policy team have all become Reaganites,” *The Weekly Standard* 8, no. 21 (2 October 2003): 1. This can be read in part as the legacy of a Straussian concern with the nature of the “regime.” See, for example, Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*, 28–9, but it also has broader sources. There are also, of course, intriguing implications in these formulations for constructivist theories in International Relations, but we leave these aside here.

of both intellectual and political life: a mark of decadence masquerading as objectivity that contributes to processes of social erosion, fragmentation, and decadence, and that undermines the maintenance of a viable conception of the public interest and, by extension, the national interest.

Second, a realist policy guided by traditional “Realpolitik” alone is ironically, yet profoundly, unrealistic. Unable to connect adequately to the values and identity of the American people, a realist foreign policy will fail to generate either the commitment or the resources necessary to ensure its success. Accordingly, in an early call for a “neo-Reaganite foreign policy,” William Kristol and Robert Kagan drew upon this theme to insist that:

It is already clear that, on the present course, Washington will find it increasingly impossible to fulfill even the less ambitious foreign policies of the realists, including the defense of so-called ‘vital’ national interests in Europe and Asia. 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.⁸²

Finally, instead of providing security for American society, a realist foreign policy actually contributes to its decay. Lacking a clear vision of the national interest that can be explained to citizens and connected to their values, realist foreign policy is of necessity often duplicitous. But mendacious policies abroad only further erode virtue at home, and a realist policy of the national interest actually exacerbates political cynicism and social decay within the state, as citizens either adopt a similar cynicism in their relations to the political system or turn away from it in disgust. As a consequence, the entropic and cynical tendencies that are at the core of liberal-modernity are heightened by a realist foreign policy. Realism paradoxically encourages a division between morality and foreign policy that mirrors the liberal divide between interests and ethics, and in the process undermines both.

In sum, far from protecting the state, realist theories of the national interest actually endanger it, however advantageous their manipulative actions

⁸² William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (1996), 28. In Michael Ledeen’s notable phrasing: “Whenever I hear policy-makers talking about ‘stability,’ I get the heebie-jeebies. That is for tired old Europeans and nervous Asians, not for us. In just about everything we do, from business and technology to cinema and waging war, we are the most revolutionary force on earth. We are not going to fight foreign wars or send our money overseas merely to defend the status quo; we must have a suitably glorious objective. We are therefore not going to stick by a government that conducts foreign policy on the basis of *Realpolitik*. Without a mission, it is only a matter of time before public opinion will turn against any American administration that acts like an old fashioned European state. Just ask Henry Kissinger. That is why I find the realist position highly unrealistic.” Contribution to “American Power—For What?” *Commentary* 19, no. 1 (2000): 36.

may appear in the short term. Disconnected from values, realism cannot give any content to the national interest beyond a minimal (and ultimately ineffective and debilitating) pragmatism, or a corrosive cynicism. A manipulative realism will only lead to decline—incapable of pulling people with it and thereby gaining the necessary resources and support. It will either fail or have to resort to secrecy and manipulation, thus furthering in practice the social cynicism about values that it advocates in theory. Corrosive of support abroad and eroding virtue at home, it is ultimately ineffective internationally and destructive domestically.

What is even worse, in this process realism actually deprives modern societies of one of the most effective means of mobilizing virtue and combating decadence—the idea of the national interest itself. By contrast, in the neoconservative vision the national interest can be used to counter modernity's worst dynamics. A moral foreign policy reinforces those virtues and values in the citizenry of the United States and helps get their support for pursuing the national interest, which they can actually see as an expression of their values and with which they can identify. In this way, realism removes the potential for the idea of the national interest and national values to be used as an effective form of political mobilization and reformation in support of a virtuous polity. The national interest thus needs to be recaptured from traditional realists in both theory and practice so that it can become a substantive guide and mobilizing symbol in foreign policy, and contribute to political reconstruction at home.⁸³

These themes illustrate that neoconservatism clearly draws upon a Wilsonian tradition of liberal internationalism and universalism long recognized as part of what Louis Hartz called the “liberal tradition” in American political thought and culture.⁸⁴ The dynamics of this position are more complex than Hartz perhaps recognized. For Hartz, U.S. foreign policy is shaped by a liberal tradition that seeks to reform the world in its own positive image. As we might put it today with only a little distortion, America's liberal foreign policy is for him an expression and extension of its positive liberal identity. While neoconservatism definitely draws upon these themes of liberal exceptionalism and universalism, it combines them with an important second element: a deeper sense of foreboding—a constant fear that America's liberal political order is at risk of destruction not only through the actions of foreign enemies or idealistic overextension, but through internal political decline. This ability to call on both traditionally powerful positive strands of American liberalism and fear-inducing themes linked to the ever-present possibility of moral, social, and political decay and decadence, is one of neoconservatism's most

⁸³ In similar terms, neoconservatism argues that the national interest should not be reduced to commercial interests alone, since it would overlook the primacy of politics. See, for example, William Kristol and David Brooks, “What Ails the Right,” *Wall Street Journal*, 15 September 1997.

⁸⁴ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, 1955).

important distinguishing features and an important source of its rhetorical and political power.⁸⁵

These moves provided the basis upon which neoconservatism's intellectual critique of realism could be linked to broader rhetorical and political strategies. For neoconservatives, the question of the national interest goes beyond the exigencies of contemporary foreign policy. As a question of political philosophy, it is linked to issues as old and fundamental as the nature of political modernity, the travails of liberalism, and the foundations of the American republic.⁸⁶ As an issue of contemporary political practice, it transcends any absolute divide between domestic and foreign policy, incorporating issues as broad and contested as the prevailing social structures and moral standards in contemporary American life. In this vision, issues of security are systematically linked to questions of culture, and the concerns of domestic politics to those of foreign policy. The nihilistic and fragmenting aspects of modern urban society and culture must be countered by a reassertion of the values of the nation, and a restoration of the tradition of republican virtue. Strong, socially vibrant conceptions of both the public interest and the national interest are essential if a political community is to combat the corrosive acids of modernity. Attitudes toward the national interest are thus as much a concern of domestic political virtue as a dimension of foreign policy.

For neoconservatives, a correctly conceived national interest and public interest are elements of a politically virtuous circle.⁸⁷ A strong, morally cohesive society with a clear sense of the public interest provides a basis for the national interest. A national interest constructed on these lines will support the creation and maintenance of such a public. As both a product and a symbol of the public interest, the national interest not only provides a guide for policy abroad, it expresses—and in the process fosters and supports—the operation of political virtue at home. Indeed the two are seen as inseparable. As Midge Decter put it with reference to the neoconservative position in the 1970s and 1980s, “domestic policy was foreign policy, and vice-versa”;⁸⁸ or in Robert Kagan's more recent formulation: “There can be no clear dividing

⁸⁵ For an interesting treatment with important connections to this point, see Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸⁶ It has been in these terms that debates between neoconservatives and other conservatives have taken place with, for example, the “paleoconservatism” of Patrick Buchanan, or the more traditional conservatism of George Will, amongst others. To enter into these areas would here take us too far afield, but they represent an important area for consideration. On the neoconservative rejection of traditional conservatism on the grounds that it is an ineffective, backward-looking philosophy in an age of forward-looking ideologies, see Irving Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), x; and William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Post-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 75 no. 4 (1996): 31–32. For a wider analysis, see Michael C. Williams, *Culture and Security* (London: Routledge 2007): 92–119.

⁸⁷ Unsurprisingly, therefore, the two most prominent journals founded by Irving Kristol were, of course, *The Public Interest* and *The National Interest*.

⁸⁸ Quoted in John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs 1945–1994* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 57.

line between the domestic and the foreign.”⁸⁹ A true understanding of the national interest would see it as a direct expression of these values in both foreign and domestic politics.⁹⁰

This linking of the domestic and the international provides a clue to how the intellectual critique of realism could be linked to broader rhetorical strategies adopted by neoconservatives. Simply put, the “sour scepticism”⁹¹ of realists could be cast not only as being mistaken about the nature of the Iraqi regime or as misunderstanding the American national interest, but as contributing, however unwittingly, to the erosion of American values at home. By linking issues of foreign policy to questions of domestic political virtue, neoconservatives were able to draw upon powerful social, political, and rhetorical resources that could be applied directly against their realist adversaries. Most importantly, by linking the public interest and the national interest, and by making foreign policy a part of the same logic as controversies about domestic politics, neoconservatives were able to draw links between the debate over Iraq and the broader controversy over values that has dominated much of American politics for at least a decade—what are colloquially known as the “culture wars.” Indeed, neoconservatism’s impact arises to no small degree from its ability to position itself within a broader field where culture is seen as the defining element of politics and where questions of virtue and culture have become key points of political controversy. The logic of the loss of individual and social virtue thus becomes a transcendent political thematic, as applicable to representations of foreign policy positions as it is to questions of domestic affairs. One of neoconservatism’s most powerful aspects has lain in its ability to draw a homology between the international and the domestic, representing the battle over values and culture as the essence of politics and security, and vice-versa.

Casting political controversies within the language of virtue and values, and linking them to the nature of the American identity, also provides a point around which a large range of positions and concerns can coalesce and has been central to the role and influence of neoconservatism in American politics

⁸⁹ Robert Kagan, “A Tougher War for the U.S. Is One of Legitimacy,” *New York Times*, 24 January 2004.

⁹⁰ The neoconservative assault on realism has also had considerable impact on debates over the nature of realism in American foreign policy. Henry Kissinger, to use only one prominent example, has argued that “the advocates of the important role of a commitment to values in American foreign policy have won their intellectual battle,” and goes on to argue for a new synthesis of “values and interests” in debates over its future direction. Henry A. Kissinger, “Intervention With a Vision” in ed. G. Rosen, *The Right War?: The Conservative Debate On Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 53.

⁹¹ Podhoretz, “World War IV,” 154. As is often the case, the theme of cultural decadence and martial renewal is captured most vividly by Victor Davis Hanson, who writes “In an era of the greatest affluence and security in the history of civilization, the real question before us remains whether the United States—indeed any Western democracy—still possesses the moral clarity to identify evil as evil, and then the uncontested will to marshal every available resource to fight and eradicate it.” “Iraq’s Future—and Ours” in ed. G. Rosen, *The Right War*, 16–17.

over the past decade. At the broadest level, it has allowed neoconservatives to create powerful linkages with other conservative constituencies, particularly the religious Right, using foreign policy in particular as both an expression and an instrument in these cultural-political battles. Irving Kristol's recent reflections illustrate this confluence with particular clarity. As he points out,

the steady decline in our democratic culture, sinking to new levels of vulgarity, does unite neocons with traditional conservatives—though not with those libertarian conservatives who are conservative in economics but unmindful of the culture. The upshot is a quite unexpected alliance between neocons, who include a fair proportion of secular intellectuals, and religious traditionalists . . . And since the Republican Party now has a substantial base among the religious, this gives neocons a certain influence and even power.⁹²

This positioning has also had a broader social and material impact, providing a basis whereby arguments about the need for virtue, the decline of values, and the depredations of a liberal elite can find common cause with a large number of groups, movements, and organizations that share similar positions in American politics today.⁹³ There are certainly important differences between neoconservatives and other forms of American conservatism, as well as between neoconservatives themselves. But these differences should not obscure the ways in which struggle over “culture” and the politics of virtue provide a fundamentally unifying dimension across these political positions, and how the neoconservative linking of the politics of virtue with the nature of the American national interest and the security challenges it confronts has provided a basis upon which broad political alliances can be built and support generated.⁹⁴

Here, the links between the public interest and the national interest are again revealing. For in its advocacy of the idea of the public interest, neoconservatism does not only see itself as making an abstract argument in political philosophy or IR theory. It sees and presents itself as representing the real American public that believes in the values and virtues constituting the American public interest, but whose voices have been disparaged and marginalized by dominant social and political elites—primarily the much-derided liberals,

⁹² Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion,” in ed. Irwin Steltzer, *Neoconservatism* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), 35.

⁹³ There are also, of course, important material dimensions to these alliances, particularly to the amount of financial support given to neoconservative think tanks by wealthy patrons, and broader links to economic and media interests. A fuller analysis would have to account for all these dimensions.

⁹⁴ For an early and still valuable analysis, see Sarah Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), as well as John Micklethwaite and Adrian Woodridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (London: Penguin, 2004). Thomas Frank captures the tenor of these alliances more critically in *What's Wrong With America?: The Resistable Rise of the American Right* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2004).

but also, in terms of foreign policy, realists. As Irving Kristol once described this stance,

the American people are simultaneously individualistic and communal in their outlook. They really do believe that there is such a thing as the “public interest”—a *res publica* that is something more than the summation of individual interests . . . And it is this sprit of bourgeois populism, until recently so inarticulate, that neoconservatism seeks to define, refine, and represent . . . Neoconservatism aims to infuse American bourgeois orthodoxy with a new self-conscious intellectual vigor.”⁹⁵

The goal (and, crucially, the claim) is to speak for this “overwhelming majority” of the American people, and to explain to them “why they are right, and to the intellectuals why they are wrong.”⁹⁶

This move permits neoconservatives a remarkable positioning in the social and political fields. In foreign policy as in domestic policy, neoconservatism claims to represent the majority of real Americans, to speak on their behalf, and to defend the validity of their beliefs in their virtues and values (and their place as the basis for the national interest of the United States), just as vociferously as it has represented those values against the depredations of elites in the culture wars. Although a high proportion of neoconservatives are intellectuals—and are often part of what would be considered an academic elite by any standards—they are able to represent themselves as outsiders shunned and victimized by liberal (and realist) intellectuals in precisely the same way that real people are, and for the same reasons—for expressing what the people really know in an elite cultural environment dominated by self-interested, self-righteous, and yet culturally decadent liberal elites.

Neoconservatives present themselves as the intellectual counter to this elite hegemony, heroic guardians in the war of ideas, advocates of authentic Americans and their culture values—and steadfast opponents of the misguided realism that is foreign to both.

Finally, casting the debate over foreign policy in terms of virtue and values allows for the adoption of a specific and long-standing neoconservative approach in relation to academic critics of American society and (by implication) foreign policy, one that casts them as continuing contributors to what Lionel Trilling labelled the “adversary culture of intellectuals,” a sociological argument that presents contemporary academe as dominated by a self-interested elite divorced from, and largely antagonistic toward, the values and culture of everyday America. This dimension of neoconservatism also provides it with specific resources with which to confront its academic critics—precisely the professional location, of course, of many realist critics

⁹⁵ Irving Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (New York: Free Press, 1983), xiv–xv.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv–xv.

of the Iraq War. According to this argument, the academic establishment has become too self-absorbed, inattentive, cynical, and self-interested—or too lulled by the seductions of a comfortable but ultimately corrosive liberalism, an arid rationalism, a spuriously “objective” social science, or a cynical realism—to recognize the depth and urgency of the issues at stake. Defining itself in opposition to academic abstraction, neoconservatism is able to contrast its claims to those of a distanced foreign policy elite which it opposes, a stance that paradoxically allows neoconservative foreign policy elites to claim a powerful anti-elitism in popular discourse. This move lies behind the revealing spectacle of Richard Perle, consummate Washington insider and member of the foreign policy elite, claiming in the context of the war in Iraq that “the more the elites here and in Europe holler, the solidier the Bush support gets.”⁹⁷

Placing neoconservatism in this broad intellectual and political context helps to show that its challenge to realism goes well beyond the occupation of policy posts, or even debates at the level of competing conceptions of world politics and foreign policy. In fact, it was the ability to link ideas to political power—to mobilizing rhetorics and broader social concerns and networks—that played an important role in neoconservatism’s battle with realists over the war in Iraq. By linking questions of foreign policy directly to issues in domestic politics, and placing concerns about social and moral ‘decay’ within a vision of politics as a whole, neoconservatism was able to draw upon a remarkable array of ideological resources and to make common cause across many dimensions of the political spectrum in support of its foreign policy prescriptions.

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER?

The difficult and deteriorating situation in Iraq has no doubt damaged the neoconservative project, in some eyes fatally. Yet even if neoconservatism is no longer the power it was, it is important to be clear about its impact and its implications both for realism and for future debates over foreign policy in the United States and beyond. As we have shown, neoconservatism’s impact cannot be reduced to circumstances alone. However important 9/11 and the location of specific individuals in the Bush administration may have been, the ability of neoconservatives to influence the debate over Iraq also reflected a coherent intellectual position grounded in a specific philosophy of politics, a capacity to locate these arguments within powerful currents in American political culture, and an ability to use rhetorics and social networks connected to both. Obviously, the particular circumstances surrounding the invasion of Iraq will not be repeated, and the dire consequences of the decisions made

⁹⁷ Quoted in Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, 233.

may make it more difficult to use these arguments, rhetorical moves, and political alliances in the future. But appreciating the diverse resources that neoconservatism was able to mobilize should make us cautious about seeing the run-up to the Iraq War as nothing but a momentary aberration. Neoconservatism as it has been expressed in foreign and domestic politics over the past two or three decades may or may not pass from the scene, but the political potential it reflects is rooted in much deeper aspects of American politics and political culture, and is unlikely to prove as ephemeral as many of the critics and obituary writers of the neoconservative moment are wont to wish.

If this is the case, then it poses crucial challenges for realism in particular. Perhaps the most important of these lies in the way in which neoconservatism's rhetorical and political strategies have struck directly at one of the oldest dilemmas of realist theory: can realism make its analytic positions politically powerful; that is, can it speak its truth in a way powerful enough to get people—and even power—to listen? The power of neoconservatism lay in no small part in its ability to answer this question and to mobilize support through a series of political rhetorics and forms of social mobilization. The fate, and to some degree the failure, of realist criticisms of neoconservative policies toward Iraq should at the very least provide realists with reason to ponder again questions that preoccupied an earlier generation, including Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. In order for realists to win the political argument, as well as the strategic argument, it will be necessary for them to defend their policy preferences on both normative and Realpolitik grounds. In other words, realists need to be much more explicit about the values that underlie their favored policy prescriptions and more expansive in their social and political analysis—a move that stands in opposition to major trends in realist thinking in recent decades.

The issues raised both in and by these engagements are clearly beyond the scope of this analysis. However, what each shows is that a reversion to realism defined as stark opposition to the themes stressed by neoconservatives is unlikely to capture either the complexity of current debates or their likely trajectories. In the wake of the travails of U.S. policy in Iraq, realism may well be tempted to see itself as vindicated. But if it is not to fall continually into the tragic position of bemoaning failure after the fact, realism must also ask itself the old question of whether it is truly realistic in the sense of being able to have an impact on the politics of foreign policy.⁹⁸ The Owl of Minerva's flight at dusk may have had some attraction, or at least provided some comfort, within a philosophy that believed in an ultimately happy end to history. It is difficult to be so sanguine today.

⁹⁸ Joel Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists: Political Realism, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991) remains one of the best examinations of this question.