

Does Neo-Conservatism Still Matter?
Douglas Murray-August 14, 2006

With the most recent London terror plots, the issue of whether or not Neo-Conservatism has failed, especially in its foreign policy applications, has once again been raised. In order to once and for all put this question to rest, the Hudson Institute sponsored an event featuring Douglas Murray, author of the recently-published book titled “Neoconservatism: Why It Matters.” One of the most brilliant young neo-conservative minds in Europe, Murray argued that only through neo-conservative thought and actions could the West deal with the problems of our time, and deal with them early as truly liberal men, rather than down the road as



barbarians. Murray provided not only a fresh view-point on one of the most vilified ideologies of this new century, but also a distinctly European perspective on what neo-conservatism means and its relation to the future. This event was moderated by the Hudson Institute’s John O’Sullivan, director of the Center for European Studies at Hudson.

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The initial topic of this speech was whether or not a European can be a neo-conservative. In light of the recent terror plots, however, the topic has been changed slightly to focus on whether or not neo-conservatism still matters in today’s world. Before delving into that topic, however, it is important to define what is meant by neo-conservatism. Irving Kristol’s definition of a neo-con being a “liberal mugged by reality” stopped applying some time ago, as the most prominent neo-cons of today never were liberals to begin with. Neo-conservatives are neither a cabal nor a party, but rather a sense of looking at the world which is a blend of realism and idealism. To be a neo-con is to look at the world as it is but act in the world to make it how neo-cons would like it to be. Neo-cons look at the world through an idealist’s eyes, but wear heavy and powerful glasses. They are moralists with good eyesight, unified by a common belief in freedom, both domestically from the state and internationally from tyrants.

What differentiates neo-conservatives today from paleo-conservatives is that traditional conservatism is tactically flawed in two aspects. First, it relies on a noble sense of loyalty to the status quo, as the name itself implies. Yet the status quo as we know it today has changed. In

this situation, a conservative has the unenviable task of having to continue to be loyal to a status quo that is no longer his status quo. The alternative is to stop being a conservative and become that seeming anathema, a revolutionary conservative; in other words, a neo-conservative. The second flaw is that instinctive conservatism on its own has proven woefully inadequate against the “machinations and trickery” of the left.

Neo-conservatism, by contrast, can hold up and destroy the presumptions of the current generation of politicians now in power in Europe. At the crossroads of neo-conservatism, the inbuilt conservative instinct meets a hardened and tested philosophy which not only defends natural right and certain absolutes, but provides the antidote to the greatest philosophical disaster of our time; that is, the disaster of relativism. Neo-cons, such as Murray, believe that ideas matter; that, as Irving Kristol put it, “what rules the world are ideas.” However, for the longest time conservatives have presumed that they have lost the “war of ideas” and hence have not realized that they can make the world better and that they can fight for their ideas.

What began as a philosophical nightmare for neo-cons now has real and devastating impact on our body politic. For instance, the UN and a large number of both democratic and tyrannical states cannot discern the moral difference between the two sides in the Israel-Lebanon conflict. Instead, these actors see the war as a 50-50 event, a conflict in which to take a side would be to make an unacceptable value-judgment. The aim of all their efforts, therefore, is not the disbandment and disarmament of

Hezbollah, but a cease-fire. Yet destroying the missiles, continuing with the military campaign, and explaining the various specific attacks on the Lebanese infrastructure, placing them within the wider context of the war on Hezbollah, is seen as an untenable alternative. It is as though a return to the status quo ante is supposed to be a victory for peace, rather than a mockery of it. The return to the status quo ante, however, is a victory for Hezbollah.



Accordingly, relativism has created a soup in which childish and pernicious ideas now flourish. It’s not about right and wrong, but creates a nihilistic philosophy in which suffering provides legitimacy. The result of relativism is that the wicked is unnaturally elevated and the good maligned. Such a philosophical problem affects foreign policy and the very existence of the West at home. Neo-cons believe that this is not about the world becoming a melting pot, but making the West a laboratory for an experiment which can only lead to the destruction to the West. Neo-cons, including Murray, believe that multiculturalism is in essence, as Samuel Huntington put it best, anti-European civilization. The degradation of Europe and the problems of America constitute much the same problem.

Border control and immigration here in the United States have at their root the same problems that Europeans are facing with their Muslim and other immigrant populations. — the question of how the West can remain the West, as a cultural and not just a physical entity, where the West is not just one lifestyle option in which you might choose the Western tradition, but if “jihad is your bag,” then that is also acceptable. Along this same argument, border security is one of the most basic priorities of any government, along with defense of the nation. Yet Western governments from America and Canada to Britain and Europe can find no way to expel from our midst those who take from us while simultaneously plotting against us. For instance, in Britain the government has been incapable of expelling clerics who advocate violence against the state; similarly so in France and Holland. In Britain, a group of illegal Afghan immigrants who had hijacked a plane to get into Britain are still at large in the country, as the government can find no good reason to violate their human rights and expel them from the country. Neo-cons like Murray strong believe that the 21st century will involve the demise of countries at a slow pace, and the borders issue is at the forefront of this demise. If immigration happens quickly, as it has been in the U.S., then there is no incentive for immigrants to integrate, to become part of society, to be loyal to their new nation. This leads to an unfortunate narrative of the future of the West— where, in fifty years, will one go to uphold the Western traditions and

civilization? Where will the “West” be and where could it be practiced other than as a set of lifestyle options?

Over the last three years, many gleeful commentators have declared neo-conservatism over; but have not provided a viable alternative to replace the neo-conservative project. There are those who have decided that the election of Hamas, or the slow forming of a new government in Iraq, demonstrate that these foreigners have no desire to rule themselves. Nevertheless, Murray argues, the election of Hamas is a problem we have with Hamas, not with democracy. Likewise, the problems with continued civil unrest in Iraq do not demonstrate that Saddam was keeping a lid on things.

Societies which can find no rational reason why they should not be destroyed will be destroyed, and free people who can find no way to understand what

makes them superior to terrorists will find the march of history going not in their direction but in the direction of their enemies! It is important for Americans and Europeans to understand, as Murray suggests,

that if a group of people threaten to kill, murder, and maim us when we do act, and threaten to kill, murder and maim us when we do not act, then that is a group of people we should not be listening to. In essence, the feelings of terrorists are evidently not a useful moral guide. Just as is the case in Iraq, however, the West



continually underestimates the “wickedness” of the enemy.

So what does the world look like today? The Axis of Evil appears to be outliving and outdoing many of its doubters. In the last week alone Iran has boasted of its supplying of missiles to Hezbollah. It has been sending not only munitions but troops to fight the Israelis, and short of Kim Jong-Il riding in on one of these missiles himself, Murray can’t imagine a clearer example of the Axis at work. Iran has also boasted of its flouting of the international community on the nuclear issue, which no one apparently will do a thing to stop. Syria and Iran have made the calculation that we, the West, are weak, and our weakness as so often has proved a provocation.

The tyrants have become emboldened and we are heading into a period as dangerous, and as avoidable, as any other in our history. We are heading there because we are losing faith in ourselves. For instance, Europe has had a crisis of self-confidence for some time now. The least useful situation now would be if America joined in this crisis of confidence. The neoconservative revolution will allow the West to deal with the problems of our times, and deal with them early, as truly liberal men, rather than down the road as barbarians. America has inspired and led the way; neo-conservatism is the first political movement to cross the Atlantic and inspire movements in Europe and Britain. Now is not the time for America to “go wobbly” in its ideological support of neo-conservatism as the only solution to the problems of the future.

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