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Thinking About Neoconservatism

By [Kevin MacDonald](#)

Over the last year, there's been a torrent of articles on neoconservatism raising (usually implicitly) some vexing issues: Are neoconservatives [different from other conservatives](#)? Is neoconservatism a Jewish movement? Is it "[anti-Semitic](#)" to say so?

The dispute between the [neocons](#) and more traditional conservatives — "[paleoconservatives](#)" — is especially important because the latter now find themselves on the outside, looking in on the conservative power structure.

Hopefully, some of the venom has been taken out of this argument by the remarkable recent article by neoconservative "godfather" Irving Kristol ("[The Neoconservative Persuasion](#)," *Weekly Standard*, August 25, 2003). With commendable frankness, Kristol admitted that

"the historical task and political purpose of neoconservatism would seem to be this: to convert the Republican party, and American conservatism in general, against their respective wills, into a new kind of conservative politics suitable to governing a modern democracy."

And, equally frankly, Kristol eschewed any attempt to justify U.S. support for Israel in terms of American national interest:

"[L]arge nations, whose identity is ideological, like the Soviet Union of yesteryear and the United States of today, inevitably have ideological interests in addition to more material concerns... That is why we feel it necessary to defend Israel today, when its survival is threatened. No complicated geopolitical calculations of national interest are necessary."

If the US is an "ideological" nation, this can only mean that the motivations of neoconservative ideology are a legitimate subject of intellectual inquiry.

For example, it is certainly true that the [neocons' foreign policy](#) fits well with a plausible version of Jewish interests, but is arguably only tenuously related to [the interests of the U.S.](#) Also, neocons oppose the isolationism of important sections of traditional American conservatism. And neocon attitudes on issues like race and immigration differ profoundly from those of traditional mainstream conservatives — but resemble closely the common attitudes of the wider American Jewish community.

Count me among those who accept that the [Jewish commitment of leading neoconservatives](#) has become a critical influence on U.S. policies, and that the effectiveness of the neoconservatives is greatly enhanced by their alliance with the organized Jewish community. In my opinion, this conclusion is based on solid data and reasonable inferences. But like any other theory, of course, it is subject to reasoned discussion and disproof.

We shouldn't be surprised by the importance of ethnicity in human affairs. Nor should we be intimidated by charges of anti-Semitism. We should be able to discuss these issues openly and honestly. This is a practical matter, not a moral one.

Ethnic politics in the U.S. are certainly not limited to [Jewish activism](#). They are an absolutely normal phenomenon throughout history and around the world.

But for well over half a century, with rare [exceptions](#), Jewish influence has been off-limits for rational discussion. Now, however, as the U.S. acquires an empire in the Middle East, this ban must inevitably [fall away](#).

My views on these issues are shaped by my [research](#) on several other influential Jewish-dominated intellectual and political movements, including the Boasian school of anthropology, Freudian psychoanalysis, the Frankfurt School of Social Research, Marxism and several other movements of the radical left, as well as the movement to change the ethnic balance of the United States by allowing mass, non-traditional immigration.

My conclusion: Contemporary neoconservatism fits into the general pattern of Jewish intellectual and political [activism](#) I have identified in my work.

I am not, of course, saying that all Jews, or even most Jews, supported these movements. Nor did these movements work in concert: some were intensely hostile to one another. I *am* saying, however, that the key figures in these movements identified in some sense as Jews and viewed their participation as in some sense advancing Jewish interests.

In all of the Jewish intellectual and political movements I studied, there is a strong Jewish identity among the core figures. All center on charismatic Jewish leaders—people such as Boas, Trotsky and Freud— who are revered as messianic, god-like figures.

Neoconservatism's key founders trace their intellectual ancestry to the "New York Intellectuals," a group that originated as followers of Trotskyite theoretician Max Schactman in the 1930s and centered around influential journals like *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* (which is in fact published by the [American Jewish Committee](#)). In the case of neoconservatives, their early identity as radical leftist disciples shifted as there began to be evidence of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. Key figures in leading them out of the political left were philosopher Sidney Hook and Elliot Cohen, editor of *Commentary*. Such men as Hook, Irving Kristol, Norman

Podhoretz, Nathan Glazer and Seymour Martin Lipset, were deeply concerned about anti-Semitism and other Jewish issues. Many of them worked closely with Jewish activist organizations. After the 1950s, they became increasingly disenchanted with leftism. Their overriding concern was the welfare of Israel.

By the 1970s, the neocons were taking an aggressive stance against the Soviet Union, which they saw as a bastion of anti-Semitism and opposition to Israel. Richard Perle was the prime organizer of Congressional support for the [1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment](#) which angered the Soviet Union by linking bilateral trade issues to freedom of emigration, primarily of Jews from the Soviet Union to Israel and the United States.

Current key leaders include an [astonishing number](#) of individuals well placed to influence the Bush Administration: (Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, I. Lewis Libby, Elliott Abrams, David Wurmser, Abram Shulsky), interlocking media and thinktankdom (Bill Kristol, Michael Ledeen, Stephen Bryen, John Podhoretz, Daniel Pipes), and the academic world (Richard Pipes, Donald Kagan).

As the neoconservatives lost faith in radical leftism, several [key neocons](#) became attracted to the writings of [Leo Strauss](#), a classicist and political philosopher at the University of Chicago. Strauss had a very strong Jewish identity and viewed his philosophy as a means of ensuring Jewish survival in the Diaspora. As he put it in a 1962 Hillel House lecture, later republished in [Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker](#):

"I believe I can say, without any exaggeration, that since a very, very early time the main theme of my reflections has been what is called the 'Jewish 'Question'."

Strauss has become a cult figure—the quintessential rabbinical guru with devoted disciples.

While Strauss and his followers have come to be known as neoconservatives — and have even claimed to be simply “conservatives”—there is [nothing conservative](#) about their goals. This is most obviously the case in foreign policy, where they are attempting to rearrange the entire Middle East in the interests of Israel. But it is also the case with domestic policy, where acceptance of rule by an aristocratic elite would require a complete political transformation. Strauss believed that this aristocracy would be compatible with Jewish interests.

Strauss notoriously described the need for an external *exoteric* language directed at outsiders, and an internal *esoteric* language directed at ingroup members. In other words, the masses had to be deceived.

But actually this is a general feature of the [movements](#) I have studied. They invariably frame issues in language that appeals to non-Jews, rather than explicitly in terms of Jewish interests. The most common rhetoric used by Jewish intellectual and political movements has been the language of moral universalism and the language of science—languages that appeal to the educated elites of the modern Western world. But beneath the rhetoric it is easy to find statements expressing the Jewish agendas of the principal actors.

For example, anthropologists under the leadership of Boas viewed their crusade against the concept of “race” as, in turn, combating anti-Semitism. They also saw their theories as promoting the ideology of cultural pluralism, which served perceived Jewish interests because the U.S. would be seen as consisting of many co-equal cultures rather than as a European Christian society.

Similarly, psychoanalysts commonly used their theories to portray anti-Jewish attitudes as symptoms of psychiatric disorder.

Conversely, the earlier generation of American Jewish Trotskyites ignored the [horrors](#) of the [Soviet Union](#) until the emergence there of state-sponsored anti-Semitism.

Neoconservatives have certainly appealed to American patriotic platitudes in advocating war throughout the Middle East—gushing about spreading American democracy and freedom to the area, while leaving unmentioned their own strong ethnic ties and family links to Israel.

Michael Lind has [called](#) attention to the neoconservatives' "**odd bursts of ideological enthusiasm for 'democracy'**"— odd because these calls for democracy and freedom throughout the Middle East are also coupled with support for the Likud Party and other like-minded groups in Israel that are driven by a vision of an [ethnocentric](#), expansionist Israel that, to outside observers at least, bears an unmistakable (albeit unmentionable) resemblance to apartheid South Africa.

These inconsistencies of the neoconservatives are not odd or surprising. The Straussian idea is to achieve the aims of the elite ingroup by using language designed for mass appeal. War for "**democracy and freedom**" sells much better than a war explicitly aimed at achieving the foreign policy goals of Israel.

Neoconservatives have responded to charges that their foreign policy has a Jewish agenda by labeling any such analysis as "[anti-Semitic](#)." Similar charges have been echoed by powerful activist Jewish organizations like the [ADL](#) and the [Simon Wiesenthal Center](#).

But at the very least, Jewish neoconservatives like Paul Wolfowitz, who were deeply involved in pushing for the war in Iraq, should frankly discuss how their close family and personal ties to Israel have affected their attitudes on US foreign policy in the Middle East.

Wolfowitz, however, has refused to discuss this issue beyond [terming](#) such suggestions "**disgraceful**."

A [common argument](#) is that neoconservatism is not Jewish because of the presence of various non-Jews amongst their ranks.

But in fact, the ability to recruit prominent non-Jews, while nevertheless maintaining a Jewish core and a commitment to Jewish interests, has been a hallmark—perhaps the key hallmark—of influential Jewish intellectual and political movements throughout the 20th century. Freud commented famously on the need for a non-Jew to represent psychoanalysis, a role played by Ernest Jones and C. G. Jung. [Margaret Mead](#) and Ruth Benedict were the public face of Boasian anthropology. And, although Jews represented over half the membership of both the Socialist Party and the Communist Party USA at various times, neither party ever had Jews as presidential candidates and no Jew held the top position in the Communist Party USA after 1929.

In all the Jewish intellectual and political movements I reviewed, non-Jews have been accepted and given highly-visible roles. Today, those roles are played most prominently by Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld whose ties with neoconservatives go back many years. It makes excellent psychological sense to have the spokespeople for any movement resemble the people they are trying to convince.

In fact, neoconservatism is rather unusual in the degree to which policy formulation — as opposed to implementation — is so predominantly Jewish. Perhaps this reflects U.S. conditions in the late 20th century.

All the Jewish intellectual and political movements I studied were typified by a deep sense of orthodoxy—a sense of “us versus them.” Dissenters are expelled, usually amid character assassination and other [recriminations](#).

This has certainly been a feature of the neocon movement. The classic recent example of this “We vs. They” world is [David Frum’s attack](#) on **“unpatriotic conservatives”** as anti-Semites. Any conservative who opposes the Iraq war as contrary to U.S. interests and who notes the pro-Israeli motivation of many of the important players, is not to be argued with, but eradicated. **“We turn our backs on them.”** This is not the spirit out of which the Anglo-American parliamentary tradition was developed, and in fact was [not endorsed](#) by other non-Jewish pro-war conservatives.

Jewish intellectual and political movements have typically had ready access to prestigious mainstream media channels, and this is certainly true for the neocons. The anchoring by the *Washington Post* of the columns of Charles [Krauthammer](#) and Robert [Kagan](#) and by the *New York Times* of William [Safire's](#) illustrates this. But probably more important recently has been the invariable summoning of neoconservatives to represent the **“conservative”** line on the TV Networks. Is it unreasonable to suppose that this may be somewhat influenced by the famously [heavy](#) Jewish role in these operations?

Immigration policy provides a valuable acid test for the proposition that neoconservatism is actually a vehicle for perceived Jewish ethnic interests. I believe I have been able to demonstrate that pro-immigration elements in American public life have, for over a century, been largely led, [funded, energized and organized by the Jewish community](#) [*PDF file*]. American Jews have taken this line, with a few isolated exceptions, because they have believed, as Leonard S. Glickman, president and CEO of the [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society](#), has bluntly [stated](#), **“The more diverse American society is the safer [Jews] are.”** Having run out of Russian Jews, the HIAS is now [deeply involved](#) in recruiting refugees from Africa.

When, in the middle 1990s an immigration reform movement arose amongst American conservatives, the reaction of the neoconservatives ranged from cold to hostile. No positive voice was permitted on the Op-Ed page of the *Wall Street Journal*, by then a neoconservative domain. (Perhaps significantly, a more recent exception has been a relatively favorable review of the anti-illegal immigration book [Mexifornia](#)— whose author, the military historian Victor Davis Hanson, has distinguished himself by the [extreme hawkishness](#) of his views on the Middle East.) The main vehicle of immigration reform sentiment, *National Review*, once a [bastion](#) of traditional conservative thought, was quite quickly [captured](#) by neoconservatives and its opposition to immigration reduced to nominal.

Prior to the post-9/11 U.S. invasion of the Middle East, this suppression of the immigration reform impulse among conservatives was probably the single most important contribution of the neoconservatives to the course of U.S. history.

It may yet prove to be the most disastrous.

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