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The Committee's Project: From SALT to Baghdad

by
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A legal *coup d'etat* brought the United States the most right-wing government in its history. However illegitimate the Bush Administration's birth, though, its seizure of power marks the latest stage in a political process that is a quarter of a century old. Despite its 2000 resort to electoral fraud and legal trickery, the contemporary Right has been remarkably successful in undermining social welfare and militarizing the country. Still, it is an unstable coalition that is always under stress and occasionally shows signs of decomposition. These fractures offer new possibilities for progressive politics, but it's important to be realistic. The Right's constituents certainly differ in important respects, but its mass base of anti-statist populists and Christian zealots remain connected by similar roots and complementary programs. It shares a common origin in an attack on the civil rights, antiwar and associated social movements of the 1960s and 70s. Its resentment and insecurity continue to drive an often-contradictory project of free markets and moral restoration.

The third element of the modern Right has a different point of origin and a different focus of interest. Neo-conservatism initially took shape as a critique of post-Vietnam U.S. foreign policy and was then driven to the right on domestic issues by its virulent anti-communism. It is this tendency that has made the most persuasive arguments for the primacy of military strength in domestic and foreign affairs. The democratic upsurge of the 1960s and 70s and defeat in Vietnam notwithstanding, the neo-conservatives were able to convince the electorate that guns were more important than butter. Popular opinion had changed dramatically by the early years of the Reagan presidency, won over by the simplicity of the neo-conservative prescription for national renewal and the collapse of any credible alternative. From its original incarnation as the Committee on the Present Danger to its new version as the Project for a New American Century, neo-conservatism has taken its cue from Arthur Vandenberg's famous advice to Harry Truman that he would have to "scare hell out of the American people" if he wanted to mount an aggressive global anticommunist foreign policy. For the last quarter

John Ehrenberg

of a century, its spokesmen have repeatedly claimed that liberal Democratic Presidents have left the United States dangerously vulnerable to internal corruption and dangerous foreign enemies. Even now, as its Iraqi gamble disintegrates and it drives the United States toward catastrophe, it continues to insist that building an unchallengeable military force can transform the world and organize an American century.

Post-World War II prosperity meant that anti-communism and militarism did not require an attack on social welfare, and Democratic Cold War liberals like Irving Kristol initially tended to defend the New Deal. But the Great Society was another thing altogether, and thinly disguised racist fears that economic redistribution could get in the way of an arms race drove the first generation of neo-conservatives toward the GOP. Anticommunism had always pulled American politics to the right of course, and it wasn't long before Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Nathan Glazer were attacking economic redistribution, warning about affirmative action, and abandoning a Democratic Party that appeared too weak to discipline blacks at home and confront the Soviet Union abroad. Veterans of the "vital center," they worried that liberal weakness in the face of social disorder and wishful thinking about the international environment would make it difficult to divert limited resources toward a more aggressive foreign policy. Increasingly isolated in the Democratic Party, they were particularly alarmed by George McGovern's 1972 presidential candidacy. When some New York Jewish intellectuals added a reflexive defense of Israeli expansionism, a distinct ideological and political tendency organized around cutting social welfare and militarizing an anti-communist foreign policy appeared. It took the organizational form of the Committee on the Present Danger.

Originally formed in 1950 by a group of powerful Washington insiders, the first Committee on the Present Danger claimed to be a "citizen's lobby" that wanted to "alert the country" to the growing Soviet menace. Its insistent propaganda proved very helpful to those who wanted to establish the ideological foundations for a postwar anti-communist foreign policy. The central element was putting an end to post-war illusions that the United States could expand social welfare at home, since national "defense" would require a huge military build-up and a permanent struggle with an implacable foe. This bi-partisan consensus remained intact until the Johnson presidency. Defeat in Vietnam thoroughly discredited militarism and interventionism and another fear campaign promptly took shape. In 1976, the second Committee on the Present Danger warned that the United States was falling

John Ehrenberg

behind the Soviet Union in military matters and announced a new drive to reestablish “national defense” as the state’s core activity. Its key elements were militarizing the struggle against Moscow, defending Israel, and blocking Third World redistributionist attacks on the developed states. As President Carter tried to move toward a more multilateral and cooperative international order by strengthening earlier Republican policies of detente and arms control, the Committee counterattacked. It claimed that the Soviet Union had effectively abandoned peaceful coexistence, was engaged in a massive rearmament campaign, and was seeking military supremacy and control of Middle Eastern oil. Insistent, urgent and increasingly radical attacks appeared in the pages of *Commentary*, all organized around false claims of American weakness, exposes of Soviet expansionism, assaults on detente and arms control, finger-pointing at black and Third World “anti-Semitism,” defenses of anticommunist tyrants, criticism of Democratic post-Vietnam cowardice and defeatism, attacks on a parasitical black “underclass,” and – above all – fears about the “Finlandization” of the United States.

Their attention to public opinion marked the neo-conservatives’ growing sophistication. Earlier elements of the right hadn’t bothered with appeals to the population, secure in the knowledge that established wealth and privilege would always carry the day. Defeat in Vietnam signaled a short-term change in the way Americans thought of themselves in the world, but it wasn’t long before a distinctly conservative appeal based on militarism, stability, and nationalism appeared. Continuous attacks on alleged Democratic weakness and naïveté were mounted by a host of new right-wing “think tanks” and advocacy organizations, and as public opinion polls registered increasing support for military spending, President Carter responded with a turn toward a more bellicose foreign policy toward the end of his term. The Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were important catalysts, but a relentless ideological campaign had legitimized the view that the United States faced imminent peril and that military force is the prime determinant of a nation’s international influence. All this proved too much for Carter. He could have fought and articulated a foreign policy of interdependence and internationalism, but he tried to compromise with a far more ideological and tenacious foe and ended up losing the struggle.

The Committee on the Present Danger’s false claims about military vulnerability had put arms control and detente on trial, but it really came into its own with Reagan’s election. Anticommunism and resistance to social justice have always gone together, and attacks on the welfare state cannot be

John Ehrenberg

understood apart from neo-conservative attacks on detente and arms control. Indeed, the sorry political history of the past twenty-five years began, not with a direct attack on the New Deal, but with the Committee on the Present Danger's warnings that Carter had disarmed the country, that detente was a trap, and that large increases in military spending were essential if the United States were to survive. In an environment of inflation, austerity and tight budgets, this required substantial attacks on social welfare and political democracy. Samuel Huntington's infamous 1975 essay on America's "democratic distemper" merely registered how much things had changed in so short a time. A reallocation of state priorities would end the country's "governability crisis," reduce demands on the state, restore traditional centers of authority and lead the way to an American renewal.

Reagan was just the man to make the argument. The Committee on the Present Danger's attacks on SALT II and its urgent warnings that a "window of vulnerability" had opened were as false as Kennedy's earlier claims about a Republican "missile gap" – but it was always an ideological claim at bottom, and a lie endlessly repeated becomes truth if it's not exposed. As the neo-conservatives pushed a new anti-communist crusade abroad, they turned against the welfare state at home. If the social movements of the 1960s and 70s made the international struggle against the Soviet Union more difficult, they had to be contained. If notions of economic redistribution were becoming popular, they had to be defeated. If authority, patriotism and religion could strengthen state action abroad, so much the better. If the old alliance of mild social reform and militant anticommunism could no longer be maintained, good riddance – particularly to black demands for economic justice.

And so we come to the Project for a New American Century, the heir to the Committee on the Present Danger and one of the most important voices of contemporary neo-conservatism. Founded in 1997, it developed the same sort of critique of Democratic weakness and vacillation as its predecessor – but now the international context was different. Where the Committee made its living by inventing American weakness in face of an illusory Soviet threat, the Project adapted the first generation's aggressive militarism to an environment in which the United States stood unchallenged. Rearmament was no longer couched as a defensive necessity to save a beleaguered country; the collapse of the Soviet Union now gave Washington the chance to remake the entire world. But the basic approach was unchanged. Representing the continuity between new and old, Chairman William Kristol, son of Irving,

John Ehrenberg

introduced the Project on its website. “The Project for the New American Century,” he announced, “is a non-profit educational organization dedicated to a few fundamental propositions: that American leadership is good both for America and for the world; that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle; and that too few political leaders today are making the case for global leadership. The Project for the New American Century intends, through issue briefs, research papers, advocacy journalism, conferences, and seminars, to explain what American world leadership entails,” he continued. “It will also strive to rally support for a vigorous and principled policy of American international involvement and to stimulate useful public debate on foreign and defense policy and America's role in the world.”

This is not a trivial matter, since the entire analysis leads right to Baghdad. The leading lights of the Project for a New American Century, whose more aggressive name befits its more aggressive agenda, now sit at the very center of state power. Elliot Abrams, Gary Bauer, John Bolton, William Bennett, Jeb Bush, Dick Cheney, Frank Gaffney, Donald Kagan, Zalman Khalilzad, “Scooter” Libby, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz – they’re all there, along with a sprinkling of old-timers like Midge Decter, Norman Podhoretz and Fred Ikle. The basic position is a simple one: a changed international environment means that the United States can – and should – do what it wants to remake the world. Since its goals are benevolent and beyond reproach, this boils down to the old doctrine that might makes right. Dramatic increases in military spending, confrontation with hostile regimes, and readiness to act unilaterally are the foundations of the neo-conservative approach, all of it taking shape in a happy era of unchallengeable American superiority.

It didn’t take long for these old ideas to become policy. As soon as its *coup* had been completed, the Bush Administration announced its intention to ignore the Kyoto Protocol, renounce arms control agreements, and oppose the International Criminal Court – measures perfectly consistent with the Project’s claim that “the preservation of a decent world order depends chiefly on the exercise of American leadership.” The old policy proved infinitely adaptable to new conditions. Ensconced in power well before the events of September 11, Administration neo-conservatives were ready, willing – and able – to use national tragedy in service of an agenda that had been in place for years. They started out as aggressive triumphalists, but they knew that national catastrophe and the subsequent “war on terrorism” would allow

John Ehrenberg

them to apply Vandenberg's advice to a changed international environment. If the Soviet Union was no longer useful, Al Qaeda would suffice.

Lest the connection to the Committee be lost, the Project had prepared a 90 page report that advocated "Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategies, Forces and Resources for a New Century." Published in September 2000 and still available on its website, the report was written to affect the Presidential election and influence a new government. Like its predecessor, the Project issued its report at the end of a Democratic administration; like its predecessor, it promised a more muscular approach to force; and, like its predecessor, it demanded a reordering of spending priorities. If the Committee's tone had been worried, alarmist and defensive, the Project was calmer and more confident as it made the case for a vast new arms buildup in support of an aggressive foreign policy. If the Committee had warned that American survival depended on countering a gathering Soviet threat, the Project "has been concerned with the decline in the strength of America's defenses, and in the problems this would create for the exercise of American leadership around the globe and, ultimately, for the preservation of peace." Now is not the time, the report argued, to retreat from the country's "responsibility" to maintain world order. Military power is the most reliable pillar of stability and peace, it insisted, and once again the neo-conservatives were able to cloak themselves in the mantle of sober, mature responsibility in the name of breaking with illusion, vacillation and weakness.

This entire argument was in place before September 11. Indeed, the neo-conservatives seized power as old-fashioned realists who thought they were operating in a classical state system that was subject to traditional rules of action. Having spent years thinking about the future, their initial approach was directed more against China than anyone else. But however inept their thinking and ham-handed their action after September 11th, the old trade-off of guns for butter remained intact. "Maintaining U.S. preeminence, precluding the rise of a great power rival, and shaping the international security order in line with American principles and interests" required the abandonment of all illusions that a "peace dividend" was available to improve the quality of life at home. Now is the time, the Project's report repeatedly insists, to act decisively and reorganize the world. The original world view is unchanged. If anti-Soviet containment had yielded to a more explicitly aggressive foreign policy centered on East Asia, then massive spending to "modernize" American forces to fight multiple wars has become indispensable. American troops and other "assets" have to be stationed

John Ehrenberg

around the world; the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty must be renounced so the U.S. can build its long-desired interceptor system; the Army must be transformed into a devastating and flexible offensive power; the Air Force has to become a “global first-strike force”; and the Navy must be able to “dominate the open oceans.”

Lest there be any doubt about the stakes involved or the sacrifices that will be demanded, the report made its priorities clear. “Keeping the American peace,” it said, “requires the U.S. military to undertake a broad array of missions today and rise to very different challenges tomorrow, but there can be no retreat from these missions without compromising American leadership and the benevolent order it secures. This is the choice we face. It is not a choice between preeminence today and preeminence tomorrow. Global leadership is not something exercised at our leisure, when the mood strikes us or when our core national security interests are directly threatened; then it is already too late. Rather, it is a choice whether or not to maintain American military preeminence, to secure American geopolitical leadership, and to preserve the American peace.” If Defense Secretary (and former General Motors Chairman) Charles Wilson had scandalized Eisenhower’s America by declaring that “what’s good for GM is good for the country,” the Project was prepared to go one step further. What’s good for America is now good for the world.

Long before Al Qaeda was a gleam in the Project’s eyes, its Report was borrowing a page from Orwell. It described an endless struggle for world supremacy fought on many fronts, a permanently militarized society, and an explicit renunciation of this country’s proud history of social reform, democracy and equality. Remaking the world won’t be cheap or easy; organizing a *Pax Americana* will require money, time and resources. The Project’s Executive Director Gary Schmitt knows where they should come from. Maintaining a balanced budget is beyond debate, since it’s out of the question to ask the owners of capital to pay for their empire. But that shouldn’t be a problem, so long as the country is willing to come to its senses, gets its priorities straight, and reach the appropriate conclusions about who ought to foot the bill for all this. “During the 1950s,” he observes, “the budget was balanced and large sums went to the military. What has changed, of course, is spending on domestic programs. Although the drop in defense spending is linked to the end of the Cold War, it is not the sole nor principal reason why the decline started in the mid-1980s and continues unabated.

John Ehrenberg

Rather, the DOD budget has been squeezed by the persistent increase in entitlements and other domestic programs.

Over the past decade, and despite concerns raised by Congress and the President about the deficit, non-defense discretionary spending has grown by some 24 percent above the inflation rate.” It’s remarkable to hear that the under funded, stingy and mean-spirited American welfare state is responsible for dangerously “squeezing” a bloated, parasitical and insupportable military budget. Schmitt’s remarkable statement should be taken for what it is: a manifesto of the Military-Industrial Complex against which Eisenhower warned the country nearly fifty years ago. It gives formal expression to a drive toward empire that is more formally acknowledged and explicitly embraced than at any time in recent memory. This drive coexists with – indeed, it is made possible by – an unprecedented concentration of wealth and power in a tiny section of the population, a political apparatus openly dedicated to serving property and money, and an increasingly explicit fusion of economic and political power that merits the ancient term “plutocracy.”

Only when a permanent war economy is the order of the day is it possible to have one’s cake and eat it too. If increased defense spending was indispensable at the end of the 1970s because of American weakness and vulnerability, it was indispensable on September 10 2001 because of American strength and invulnerability. It follows, of course, that it is even more indispensable since September 12 because of crisis, challenge and threat. It turns out that terrorism didn’t “change everything” at all. The clock moves on, but the underlying politics of the present period have stood still. Militarism without end doesn’t need an explicit set of rationales for its justification. Schmitt knows that the process has acquired a logic of its own. “Justifying such a budget increase requires moving beyond the idea that defense spending is tied simply to meeting specific threats. It means, instead, defending a large defense budget as a necessary but affordable means for taking advantage of the strategic opportunity the country has at hand. Finally, it means adoption by the United States of a grand strategy that is animated not by fear of some looming danger but, rather, pride in the confluence on the world stage of American power and principles at the close of the 20th century.”

September 11th did little but change the terms of the equation without affecting any of its underlying premises. The Project’s report named Iraq, North Korea and Iran – the Administration’s “axis of evil” – as problem

John Ehrenberg

states before Bush's *coup* was consummated, and it's well known that it was calling for an invasion of Iraq as early as 1997. Nothing has changed, but things are a lot clearer. It's no coincidence that the neo-conservatives came to power during the same period in which the state has organized the most conscious and aggressive assault on social welfare and economic equality in American history. Vandenberg was right. In the long run guns and butter were bound to clash, and the conditions that made it possible for mild social reform at home to coexist with counterrevolutionary policies abroad no longer exist. The economic expansion and generally redistributive effects of the postwar "Great Compression" featured a narrowing of class inequality and a long period of generally-shared prosperity that sustained the liberal Cold War consensus. Great swaths of the population were excluded of course, but the gains were sufficiently impressive that the country could have guns and butter at the same time. But those days have been gone for a long time. The United States is now the most unequal developed country on the planet, a trend that has been accelerating since the mid-1970s and shows no signs of slowing down. It's no accident that the tendency toward plutocracy coincides with the foreign policy trends we've been examining – nor is it an accident that the country faces the choice to which the ancients pointed. Now as never before, the choice between empire and democracy has thrust itself to the center of national politics. Now as never before, militarism means inequality. Now as never before, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few means declining living standards for the many. Now as never before, plutocracy makes democracy a sham. Now as never before, an ideological apparatus built on lies deforms public life. Now as never before, Americans need to remember what democracy and freedom really mean.

How did militarism and inequality come to shape a country with a proud egalitarian tradition and a long history of social reform? Neo-conservatism originated in a series of critiques of foreign policy, the Great Society, and the social movements of the late 1960s and early 70s. A conscious program to militarize American society has been developing in fits and starts for the past twenty-five years, its momentum partly shaped by the need to win a wide measure of popular consent. Economic crisis, persistent poverty, runaway inflation, the political mobilization of business, the collapse of Keynesianism, a religious Great Awakening – all played important parts in the story, but the independent power of ideology was enormous. Fear and insecurity have contributed mightily to the popularity of ideas that stand in bald contradiction to the most vibrant impulses of American democracy and to the interests of the vast majority of its people.

John Ehrenberg

The Right came to power by stoking fears that the United States was in imminent danger from the Soviet Union, that racial privilege was under attack, that women were out of control, and that the country's "Judeo-Christian" heritage was under assault. It has offered a witches' brew of militarism, consumerism and moralism as an alternative. It continues to rely on the same bag of tricks, cynically using the threat of terrorism to advance a political program that accelerates a drive toward empire abroad and toward social disaster at home. But nothing is permanent, in love, war or politics. If the past quarter of a century teaches us anything, it is that the American people can be won over to a program of democratic renewal and social justice. Such a program need not be organized at the expense of a "war on terror" if the latter is organized on a rational, democratic, and multilateral basis. The extremist clique running the country is demonstrably unable to do so. The neo-conservative vision of the world is deeply inaccurate and, for that reason, profoundly dangerous. Its spokesmen and organizers are driving the world toward disaster. It's time to expose them for the ignorant, brutal charlatans they are and reinvigorate American democracy as we do so.

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