THE THIRD WAY OF NEOCONSERVATISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL,
STRATEGIC, MORAL, PHILOSOPHICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS TO
NEOCONSERVATISM

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Daniel Dominique Léger

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Michael Zuckert, Director

Department of Political Science

Notre Dame, Indiana

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Abstract

By Daniel Dominique Léger

My thesis examines the public policy debates of the late 1960s to today involving arms control, détente and the War in Iraq in an effort to explain the essential strategic, political, and moral ingredients of a neoconservative foreign policy. In examining these policy debates, the objective of my thesis is not that of an historian but rather that of a political philosopher. I argue that there are two distinct lines of thought running through neoconservatism, the one strategic and the other political and moral. The two lines are married by Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz and others into a unified approach to foreign policy. Taken together with a philosophical and epistemological foundation at variance with the orthodoxy of its academic counterparts, neoconservatism is rightly understood to belong alongside modern realism, neorealism and neoliberalism as a distinct tradition in the study of international relations. On matters ranging from the importance of morality in foreign policy to the relevance of common sense as the standard for judging the effectiveness of public policy, the gulf between neoconservatism and the more mainstream traditions is very wide. Neoconservatives are just as comfortable advocating the use of military strength in pursuit
of the strategic aims of the United States as they are in writing and speaking in universal
terms of right and wrong. They are, as a whole, unashamed of associating moral rightness
with the cause of the United States and the West, in either its Cold War ideological battles
with communism or, more recently, in its confrontation with radical Islam. They take as
their starting point a broad understanding of human behavior and state action and,
consequently, they reject the importance that modern realists place on the material interest
of states and the structure of the international system as determinants of the behavior of
states and statesmen. Neoconservatives find these concepts to be poorly defined and
otherwise lacking in appreciation for history or for the every-day passions and motivations
of individuals and states. They also find the emphasis that some of the more academic
traditions like neorealism place on methodology and a stringent form of propositional logic
ill prepared to capture the political and moral issues involved in crafting an effective foreign
policy. As a result of these differences, neoconservatives and modern realists find themselves
frequently in disagreement about matters of war and peace. The tension between these
traditions goes beyond policy and highlights an obvious discomfort within neoconservatism
for the more abstract and counterintuitive arguments employed by modern realists in favor
of a more intuitive or common sense approach. It also exposes sharp differences in
conceptual logic including a disagreement over the very meaning of knowledge and the
relevance of common sense to theory making in the social sciences. In bolstering these
claims, my thesis draws heavily upon the influence of a small cadre of thinkers on the
development of neoconservatism, like the strategic theorist Albert Wohlstetter and the
political philosopher Leo Strauss: Wohlstetter was instrumental in helping establish the
strategic foundation for neoconservative thinking on US nuclear strategy and détente
whereas Strauss provided a philosophical supplement to what was otherwise an intuitive
reaction by neoconservatives to what they perceived as the pervasive relativism of
Kissinger's Realpolitik, liberal intellectuals, and the larger foreign policy establishment.
# CONTENTS

Introduction: The Third Way of Neoconservatism ................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: There Is No Rest: Albert Wohlstetter and the Strategic Basis of Neoconservatism .......................................................................................................................... 34

Chapter 2: Kissinger, Détente and the Moral and Political Ambition of Neoconservatism... 72


Chapter 4: Kenneth Waltz, Neorealism and the Neopositive Response ................................ 154

Chapter 5: The War Over Iraq: Neoconservatism, Realism and the Matter of Prudence .... 194

References .................................................................................................................................. 261
INTRODUCTION
THE THIRD WAY OF NEOCONSERVATISM

In an article entitled World War IV that appeared in the magazine, Commentary, in 2004 Norman Podhoretz sketches an expansive moral and political rationale for the war on terror. It is a polemic written in the substantive and stylistic fashion of vintage neoconservatism: its aim is purposeful (the title itself points us in its intended direction) and its style is at once grandiloquent and attack-dog like. In it, Podhoretz justifies a robust US foreign policy built on the twin pillars of American exceptionalism and hard core power considerations in an effort to overcome “the many misconceptions, distortions, and outright falsifications”1 by critics, foreign and domestic, of the Bush Doctrine.

For Podhoretz, the current enemy of the United States is not some generic form of terrorism but rather a “truly malignant force in radical Islamism and (the) states breeding, sheltering, or financing its terrorists armory.” An effective defense against an existential threat of this magnitude cannot be found in the containment logic of the Cold War nor will it be found within the fallback mindset of the “Vietnam syndrome.” What is required in the global fight against radical Islam is a judicious blend of idealism and realism or principal and force. Podhoretz finds this particular blend present within the Bush Doctrine. The Doctrine’s emphasis on “taking the fight to the enemy,” combined with the will to reform and reconstitute failed regimes like Iraq whose instability makes it fertile territory for

radicalism and virulent anti-Americanism, is what is required in the era of global terrorism.\(^2\) Anything less than such a comprehensive approach invites comparison for Podhoretz to the cut and run policies of the Reagan and Clinton Administrations or, worse, the moral defeatism of the Carter and Nixon administrations.

A close reader of Podhoretz’s article will find that he advances the perspective that not only is the world a dangerous place, but that the world is a place that can only be made less dangerous if bullies are confronted quickly and decisively; if the role of morality is tethered tightly to the formation of US foreign policy; if the lessons of history regarding appeasement are remembered (e.g. from Reagan’s withdrawal of troops from Lebanon after a terrorist attack on US Marines to the Clinton Administration’s response to terrorist attacks in the 1990s); if the United States has the courage to move forward unilaterally when necessary; and, most importantly, if political conflict is not understood as a consequence of poor communication or ineffective marketing but rather as endemic to the nature of politics itself. This perspective, according to Podhoretz, distances himself from the neoisolationism on the Right and the pacifism on the Left, or, put differently, from those he calls the “unrealistic realists” who believe efforts to democratize Iraq are “utopian” and the “advanced’ thinkers” and “sophisticated’ commentators” who are outraged by the simplicity of the good vs. evil universe in which the Bush Doctrine operates.\(^3\)

For the purposes of this study, we are right to ask to what extent does Podhoretz’s perspective capture the general principles of a definable school of thought? To what extent

\(^2\)Ibid, 28.
\(^3\)Ibid, 45.
does he express the essence of a neoconservative foreign policy? Could it be that Podhoretz’s article is merely a form of polemics, like previous ones authored by himself, Irving Kristol and other founders of neoconservatism over the last three decades? In other words, does Podhoretz’s strategic, moral and political rationale for the war on terror point to a substantive political philosophy or does he simply offer the reader an elegant blend of criticism and rationalization for policies that he happens to, for whatever reason, like or dislike?

**Thesis Outline: Neoconservatism as a Distinct Approach to International Relations**

Neoconservatives are just as comfortable advocating the use of military strength in pursuit of the strategic aims of the United States as they are in writing and speaking in universal terms of right and wrong. They are, as a whole, unashamed of associating moral rightness with the cause of the United States and the West, in either its Cold War ideological battles with communism or, more recently, in its confrontation with radical Islam. They take as their starting point a broad understanding of human behavior and state action and, consequently, they reject the importance that realists and neorealists place on the material interest of states and the structure of the international system as determinants of the behavior of states and statesmen. Neoconservatives find these concepts to be poorly defined and otherwise lacking in appreciation for history or for the every-day passions and motivations of individuals and states. They also find the emphasis that these more academic traditions place on methodology and a stringent form of propositional logic ill prepared to capture the political and moral issues involved in an effective foreign policy.
In contrast to these traditions, neoconservatives tend to eschew the intellectual abstractions necessary for the construction of a theory of the international relations. Neoconservatives, as a group, choose instead to write in a very basic, non-technical style securing their arguments on common sense and a belief in a shared reality, accessible to all. This approach, one that I argue is philosophically and epistemologically distinct, distances neoconservatism from the empirical and moral relativism of the more mainstream traditions of international relations theory. It also points to contrasting assumptions about the world, state behavior and human nature.

I argue in the following chapters that there are two distinct lines of thought running through neoconservatism, the one strategic and the other political and moral. The two lines are married by Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz and others into a unified approach to foreign policy. Taken together with philosophical and epistemological foundations that sharply differ from the orthodoxy of its academic counterparts, neoconservatism is rightly understood to belong alongside realism, neorealism and neoliberalism as a distinct tradition in the study of international relations.4

I proceed initially in chapters 1 and 2 by way of a bottom-up analysis beginning first with the substance of concrete debates regarding matters of foreign policy. I then work toward a substantive definition of neoconservatism with an eye toward its strategic, political, philosophical, epistemological and moral basis.5 I take as my starting point those policy

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5This approach, it should be noted, is in a manner consistent with the preferred style of most neoconservatives who often eschew the heavier, more theoretical argument in favor of the more topical or partisan form of, something for which they have been routinely criticized.
debates which energized neoconservatives during the late 1960s and 1970s, specifically, the policies of strategic arms control and détente with the Soviet Union under the Nixon Administration. Against these widely accepted policies, neoconservatives waged a fierce campaign through policy journals like *The Public Interest* and *Commentary* as well as in academic and technical forums, and were joined in their efforts by Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, a Cold War liberal in the mold of President Truman, a member of the Senate’s Armed Services Committee during the Nixon Administration, and a mentor to many neoconservatives. The debates surrounding détente and arms control display, in concrete form, the essential strategic, political, and moral ingredients of a neoconservative foreign policy and hint at a larger philosophical and epistemological basis.

What we find in the course of these debates is the influence of a small cadre of thinkers like Albert Wohlstetter and Leo Strauss: Wohlstetter was instrumental in establishing the strategic foundation for the neoconservative position on US nuclear strategy and détente whereas Strauss provided a philosophical supplement to the otherwise intuitive reaction by neoconservatives toward what they perceived as the pervasive relativism of Kissinger’s *Realpolitik*, liberal intellectuals, modern social and political scientists, and the larger foreign policy establishment. In the process, the theoretical and philosophical approach of both of these two thinkers bolstered a pre-existing reliance among neoconservatives on common sense as the starting point for reasoned political and policy

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6This includes the policy of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and the policy of arms control or arms reduction.

debate. The Wohlstetterian and Straussian influences are chronicled at length in chapters 1 and 3.

Chapter 4 examines neoconservatism in the context of contemporary international relations theory. Taking Kenneth Waltz as our representative, I suggest that there exists a vast gulf between the conceptual logic of these two traditions. From the standpoint of state behavior in the international system – balancing, bandwagoning or both? - to the primary passions that motivate individuals and states - survival, fear of death, pride? - to the very understanding of reality and morality - real or artifice? - neorealists and neoconservatives hold sharply different views. I argue that this conceptual gulf is a function of their diametrically opposed assumptions about the world and the very foundation of human knowledge. It also points to competing visions of human nature. These differences have enormous implications for public policy especially in regards to the appropriate role of diplomacy and the use of force in the international system. These differences, furthermore, point to the continuing relevance of neoconservatism as a distinct theory of international relations.

Lastly, in chapter 5, I confront the matter of the war in Iraq - a policy of singular importance with which neoconservatism will be forever associated. Having positioned neoconservatism as offering students of international relations a unique approach, it is essential to judge this approach by way of a real world example. This final chapter examines just how differently neoconservatives and most contemporary international relations theorists understood the arguments for and against the war. The war in Iraq is an especially poignant case study because neoconservatives have historically been quite critical of the abstractions common, in their opinion, to the thought process and policy recommendations
of the academic and foreign policy elite. The war in Iraq demonstrates that neoconservatives are themselves not immune to the lure of intellectual abstraction when confronted with the threat of nuclear terrorism in a post-9/11 world.

In what follows of this introduction, I begin with a historical review of neoconservatism and the various players involved as told through the writings of its founders, Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz. I conclude with a more detailed overview of the five chapters briefly outlined above.

**Neoconservatism: polemics or political philosophy?**

Critics have long characterized neoconservatives as opportunistic in their “frontal assaults” on public and foreign policy, deficient somehow in doing the hard work of spelling out a comprehensive political philosophy. Peter Steinfels, an early critic of neoconservatism, summarizes their style of argument as a lively blend of the personal and the general but which, ultimately, represents a failure to “plumb any depths.” In what he finds to be a defining characteristic, Steinfels sums up the neoconservative style as swimming “just below the surface of current events” albeit, as far as partisan political writings go, “there it swims very well indeed.”

For many of their critics, neoconservatism is just a sophisticated form of partisan argument.

The impression that neoconservatism lacks a comprehensive political philosophy is furthered by the manner in which some of its more self-conscious founders, including

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Podhoreetz, have chosen to characterize their approach to public and foreign policy. Neoconservatives have been reluctant to call their approach a movement or to accord it the status of theory. Instead, its founders have referred to it as, alternately, a “set of attitudes,” a “persuasion,” a “sensibility” or a “tendency.”

Nathan Glazer, a colleague of Podhoreetz at Commentary, was convinced that the differences between neoconservatives and liberals did “not have anything to do with deep, philosophical positions” but rather with “fact and common sense.”

For others, neoconservatism has been described as no less than a moral experience, a reaction to everything they saw as wrong with liberalism and the Democratic Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is, in the words of Irving Kristol, a negation of the prevailing orthodoxy:

For me, then, “neoconservatism” was an experience of moral, intellectual, and spiritual liberation. I no longer had to pretend to believe – what in my heart I could no longer believe – that liberals were wrong because they subscribe to this or that erroneous opinion on this or that topic. No – liberals were wrong, liberals are wrong, because they are liberals. What is wrong with liberals is liberalism – a metaphysics and a mythology that is woefully blind to human and political reality. Becoming a neoconservative, then, was the high point of my cold war.

Neoconservatism has its origins in the academic and policy debates of the Vietnam War and the Great Society programs of the 1960s. It is the result of a complex and, at times, very personal history that has everything to do with its founder’s growing disillusionment with
the Left and the Left’s views on foreign policy, communism, religion and the social engineering of the time, and their subsequent refuge on the Right.12

Kristol’s ire was largely directed toward liberal intellectuals13 who, in matters of foreign policy during the 1960s, confounded the differences between the aims of the United States in Southeast Asia and those of its enemies. The attitude among intellectuals represented a radical departure from the past, according to both Kristol and Podhoretz. In the decades preceding the Vietnam War, it was the common opinion of American intellectuals that opposition to Communism, by force if necessary, was “on the same moral plane” with the previous generation’s fight against Nazism. But with the messy and protracted war in Southeast Asia, American intellectuals began to question the moral purpose of their own government, not simply its tactics on the battlefield. “It was because [American intellectuals] no longer thought that Communism was so great an evil,” Podhoretz writes, “that they saw the American war against it as a greater evil than it truly was, either by comparison with other wars, or more emphatically, in relation to the political system whose extension to South Vietnam the war was being fought to prevent.”14 Along with their changing attitudes toward the use of US power in Vietnam, American intellectuals

12This was not the first time that the Right was rejuvenated with refugees from the Left. The intellectual biography of Wilmoore Kendall closely resembles, in many ways, those of Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, from the personal disillusionment with the Left to the influence of Leo Strauss on his political thought. An important difference was in the sheer numbers of those, later to be called neoconservatives, who, like Kendall before them, found refuge on the Right at a time of profound political turmoil. See John A. Murley and John E. Alvis, Wilmoore Kendall: Maverick of American Conservatives (New York: Lexington Books, 2002).

13Kristol defines an intellectual as “a man who speaks with general authority about a subject on which he has no particular competence.” See Kristol, Neoconservatism, 75.

began to see themselves “as being in perpetual ‘prophetic confrontation’ (Hans Morgenthau’s term) with principalities and powers.”

For the founders of neoconservatism, the views of liberal intellectuals led directly to a reemergence of US isolationism and a pervasive moral relativism, a relativism that informed the policies of détente with the Soviet Union and strategic arms control negotiations (e.g. SALT 1) under the Nixon Administration. Attacking what they perceived as the moral relativism of the opponents has been a consistent theme for neoconservatives since the early 1970s. And it is a theme that became widespread among many who were formerly staunch defenders of the Left in the United States, a Left that, in their recollection, was resolutely anti-communist and willing to defend the moral cause of liberalism on a global scale but which over time lost its confidence and its moral bearing in the radicalism of the late 1960s. For public intellectuals like Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Theodore Draper, James Q. Wilson, Walter Laquer, Robert Tucker, and Patrick Moynihan, among others, the loss of confidence was deeply felt. It led to a rejection of what they called “the new class,” or new Left, and, with the exception of Patrick Moynihan, a rejection of the Democratic Party. The result was a form of political thought alienated from the Left and yet never entirely comfortable on the Right.

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15 Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism*, 81. Kristol mentions Hans Morgenthau as an example of an intellectual who used that very phrase, “prophetic confrontation,” as representative of “the proper stance of the intellectual vis-à-vis his government’s policies.” See also Jeane Kirkpatrick’s conclusion regarding the condemnation of the War in Vietnam by American intellectuals in the 60s & 70s: “If the United States was ‘the most destructive power in the world’, if we are ‘capable of genocide’, if we are a ‘graceless land’, then defense of our national interest could not be integrally linked to the defense of human rights or any other morally worthy cause.” In Irwin Stelzer, ed., *The Neocon Reader*, 236.

Its unique blend of American exceptionalism and realism took concrete form in the policies of the Reagan Administration and its rejection of détente. Neoconservatives were the first to call for a hard line with the Soviet Union with the goal, not of managing the Cold War, but of winning it. The thrust of their opinions, as much as their specific policy proposals (e.g. the double-zero policy which called for the complete elimination of medium range missiles), were “attacked as hopelessly out of touch by the bien-pensant centrist foreign policy experts at places like the Council on Foreign Relations and the State Department.”17 But neoconservative opinions and policies proved prescient as the Cold War ended in total victory. The lessons learned from total victory over the Soviet Union would be applied years later in the war in Iraq and are the ones suggested by Podhoretz’s World War IV article: put bluntly, stand up to bullies and do so alone if necessary.

Out of these end-of-Cold War experiences came a new generation of neoconservatives, amongst them public intellectuals, academics and government officials like William Kristol, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Pearle, Robert Kagan, Francis Fukuyama, Zalmay Khalilzad and Charles Krauthammer. Much like the previous generation, they too had a forum for their views, The Weekly Standard. The confidence borne from the United States’ total victory in the Cold War substantiated a neoconservative foreign policy through the 1990s and provided much of the intellectual support for the war in Iraq and the Bush Doctrine. It culminated in what Francis Fukuyama has called the “neoconservative moment.”18 Support for the war in Iraq included an unusual faith among neoconservatives in the US government’s ability to nation-build, a form of social engineering that, in earlier

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years, would have likely sent shivers up their collective spines. The neoconservative moment quickly passed in the aftermath of the successful military blitz to Baghdad, evaporating into the heat of a resilient insurgency and a poorly considered reconstruction effort. This has led some, like Fukuyama himself, to declare that, because of the over-reliance on militarism and a go-it-alone attitude, “neoconservatism, as both a symbol and a body of thought, has evolved into something (he) can no longer support.”

After more than thirty years of intellectual debate, the neoconservative moment will seem a fleeting one indeed unless there is something substantive to the arguments and sentiments outlined above. A look at the influence of Albert Wohlstetter and Leo Strauss, as well as a review of the debate surrounding the war in Iraq will assist us in our efforts to more fully appreciate the lasting effects of the strategic, moral political, philosophical and espistemological basis of neoconservatism.

Albert Wohlstetter and the Strategic Basis of Neoconservatism

Strategic arms control enjoyed wide support throughout the 1960s and 1970s among realists and idealists who found in it the strategic simplicity and moral clarity that their respective traditions required. The debate surrounding arms control involved, to put things simply, those who believed in simple deterrence (threatening to bomb Soviet cities if attacked) and “those who wanted nuclear forces to play a more far-reaching political role.”

At the center of this debate was the question, how absolute a weapon is the atomic bomb?

19Francis Fukuyama, “After Neoconservatism,” 65

If the bomb was absolute in deterring offensive actions by our enemies, this would mean that complex defensive strategies (establishing elaborate second-strike capabilities) were pointless; and, if absolute, reason demanded respect for the balance of terror stalemate by not engaging in an antagonistic arms race.

Albert Wohlstetter, whose students included Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Zalmay Khalilzad, challenged the notion that deterrence was automatic and chose instead to emphasize the logic of preemption and the inherent delicacy to the nuclear balance of terror.21 Wohlstetter was openly critical of a defense strategy that relied on simply matching or overmatching Soviet weaponry “not, as is frequently said, because only a few bombs owned by the defender can make aggression fruitless, but because many can not.”22 Wohlstetter was not the only strategist at RAND to challenge the absoluteness of the bomb, but he provided it a level of empirical detail that was otherwise lacking. He called his methodological approach “opposed-systems design.”23 His research led him to clarify the objective of deterrence by focusing on the vulnerability of US Strategic Air Command (SAC) bases to Soviet attack.24 Wohlstetter subsequently devised a new strategic concept regarding second-strike capabilities and later connected the strategy of deterrence to the question of nuclear proliferation.25


22Ibid, 213.

23Albert Wohlstetter, “Theory and Opposed-Systems Design,” *Conflict Resolution* XII (1968): 302-331. He defined the term as “a kind of study that attempts to discern and answer questions affecting policy – specifically affecting a choice of ends and of means to accomplish ends that stand a good chance of being opposed by other governments” (304).

24Albert Wohlstetter et al., *Selection and Use of Strategic Air Bases* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, R-266, 1954).

Wohlsetter’s research brought him to the forefront of issues that continue to inform strategic nuclear policy debates (i.e. nuclear proliferation, effective command and control centers, strategic defense initiatives, and the development and incorporation of ever improving technologies into the military), a prominence that many of his students have enjoyed in the intervening years. His students became famous for attacking the fallacy of mirror imaging which they understood to be implicit to the policy arguments supporting arms control. The fallacy was founded, in their opinion, on a “peculiar assumption about the ‘rationality’” of Soviet leaders, one that limited the scope of Soviet ambitions to self-defense similar to that of their American counterparts.26

The realist tradition, as embodied in the writings of Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz27 largely held the view that the bomb was an absolute weapon and any attempt to “reconcile the irreconcilable” 28 was pointless and strategically flawed.29 Whereas conventional military strategy emphasized intense preparation in order to fight and win wars, and while this “strategy fits with common sense,” as Robert Jervis summarized years later, “nuclear weapons do not conform to traditional ways of thinking” and therefore nuclear strategy requires a counterintuitive approach away from the emphasis on winning and toward an emphasis on mutual loss.30 The only sensible policy for most realists, then, was

29Henry Kissinger held a more nuanced position, arguing early in his academic career for a more political understanding to US nuclear policy, one similar to the flexible response proposed by Robert McNamara under the Kennedy Administration. See Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Doubleday, 1958). However, Kissinger was also the principle architect of the SALT I negotiations and, as such, was repeatedly attacked by many neoconservatives who staffed the offices of Sen. Henry Jackson (Dem.) of Washington, a forceful opponent of arms control and détente.
one of arms control and mutual assured destruction (MAD) as only a policy of arms control mitigated the “reciprocal fear of surprise attack” in Schelling’s famous phrase; that is, only a policy of arms control would avoid triggering a dangerous arms race between the superpowers that might erroneously convince the other side that an attack was in the works.

Idealist thought also viewed nuclear weapons as absolute but favored a more radical version of arms control based on the belief that the very maintenance of a nuclear arsenal was immoral and thus moral duty dictated the adoption of a policy of “minimum deterrence.” Strategic thinking of the kind articulated by Wohlstetter was itself morally suspect, for idealists, as the very emphasis on deterrence by means of effective counter-force or second-strike capabilities increases rather than decreases the chances of nuclear war. Given the truly delicate nature of the balance of power, the only morally acceptable choice was “the gradual dismantling of the whole defense organization and its replacement with an international police.”

Both realists and idealists, therefore, agreed on the sobriety of a policy of arms control so much so that it took on the quality of a moral absolute - “tantamount to salvation” in the words of Jeane Kirkpatrick - whereas for neoconservatives, under the tutelage of Albert Wohlstetter, the logic of arms control was not only a strategic mistake but

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also dubious as a moral proposition as it violated a basic tenet of morality to not willingly put oneself in harm’s way.

As for Nixon and Kissinger’s policy of détente with the Soviet Union, while possessing none of the self-conscious opposition to the-powers-that-be as evidenced by the liberal intellectuals of the new Left, it represented a moral and strategic mistake nonetheless as it failed to take seriously the intractable evil of Communism by trying to “negotiate the nonnegotiable.” According to Norman Podhoretz, it failed fundamentally to appreciate the nature of Communist regimes (of either the Soviet or Chinese variety), believing that, despite their tyranny, the United States could “do business” with them; it further failed because by representing the Soviet Union as a competing superpower with whom we could negotiate peaceful and stable accommodations...the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations robbed the Soviet-American conflict of the moral and political dimensions for the sake of which sacrifices could be intelligently demanded by the government and willingly made by the people.35

For neoconservatives, only a theory of international relations like that of Kissinger’s Realpolitik, with its aim to replace morality in the formation of foreign policy with a resolute moral agnosticism, could make such an elementary mistake.36

Détente was seen as a capitulation to the “Vietnam syndrome” and a clear signal to the world of a lack of confidence on the part of the United States. This was especially irksome to neoconservatives because the “Vietnam syndrome” was not solely the hangover from a failed military campaign but also represented a victory for radical anti-Americanism.

35Jeffers, 208, 211.
36Ibid., see in particular the Chapter entitled, “Kissinger Reconsidered.”
which doubted the moral purpose of the United States: it was a direct assault on the notion of American exceptionalism. Détente was an amoral foreign policy that, without hesitation, ceded the moral high ground because it did not believe such ground to be relevant to geopolitical maneuvering. According to neoconservatives, it represented an unparalleled capitulation.37

This interpretation has led to the frequent criticism that neoconservatives are overzealous and unrealistic in the pursuit of their objectives. In an article in defense of détente, Henry Kissinger acknowledges that the Vietnam peace protestors “denied Nixon’s moral right to invoke the term ‘honor’” in its efforts at withdrawal, as they understood US machinations in the world as “a symptom of a national obsession with power.” This sentiment, along with the exhaustion of the American people after 20 years of waging the Cold War, was “the context of stalemate, tension, and frustration inherited by Nixon.” It was against this backdrop, Kissinger writes, that “to have launched the grandiloquent anti-Soviet crusade that our critics later (though not at the time) chastised us for not taking would have driven our domestic crisis out of control and jeopardized our alliances.” For Kissinger, the neoconservatives were guilty of understanding statecraft as “a quest for absolutes rather than the shaping of reality by means of nuances.” A nuanced US foreign policy at the time would have recognized that, at that stage in history, US hands were tied and a policy of accommodation was preferable to a self-defeating moral crusade; a nuanced reading of the situation should have also understood the US predicament as “a temporary weakness that, once overcome, would enable us to prevail over the Soviet system when geopolitical isolation and a stagnant economy had exhausted the Kremlin’s ideological zeal.” So, far

37Ibid.
from robbing the US of its most powerful force, its moral righteousness, détente was a temporary and cautious step to secure one’s footing while inwardly confident that the Soviet system would ultimately fail. 38

The debate between Kissinger and the neoconservatives is especially relevant because it points us in the direction of the political, philosophical, epistemological and moral differences between neoconservatism and 20th C. theories of international relations, specifically, realism and neorealism. For neoconservatives, the common thread running through détente and arms control, as well as the unifying principle of the “new class” of public intellectuals, is a belief that world peace and stability is attainable only by way of a profound relativism of thought and morals. In lieu of making a moral stand against an intractable enemy, détente teaches us to put aside our differences and get along. To put aside differences as profound as those between the United States and the Soviet Union requires, according to the neoconservatives, a belief that morality is unimportant or, at most, a kind of propaganda suitable only for domestic purposes. In lieu of a strategic arms policy that takes as real the political differences between the superpowers and is thus structured internally to prevail over the enemy in the event of future armed conflict, the policy of arms control teaches instead a belief in the homogeneity of human ends (survival above all else) and leads to the conclusion that reason dictates the adoption of a single policy. Or, in the more colorful words of Richard Pipes, chairman of the CIA’s “Team B’s” efforts to challenge the existing orthodoxy of US nuclear strategy, the dogma of arms control leads to a series of “reverse commonplaces” where absurdities like “the task of the military is not to
win wars but to prevent them”, “offense good, defense bad,” and “killing cities is right, killing missiles is wrong” become accepted as truisms. These “reverse commonplaces” are evidence, for neoconservatives, of poor strategy as well as the perverse effects of relativism on political thought and policymaking.

Leo Strauss, Neoconservatism and the Fact/Value Distinction

In order to address more forcefully the relativism of 20th C. political thought and its impact on the development of neoconservatism, one must consider the influence of Leo Strauss. The connection between Strauss and neoconservatism was not widely recognized prior the build-up to the US invasion of Iraq. In fact, in Peter Steinfel's 1979 book, The Neoconservatives, Strauss did not receive a single mention. That Strauss’ writings were influential to neoconservatives is evident in Kristol’s autobiography where he remarks on how he reveled in the “intellectual shock” of reading Strauss, describing it as a “once-in-a-lifetime experience.” Once the connection was widely made in the press, thoughtful commentators focused most of their attention around Strauss’ teaching regarding the concept of regime. Strauss’ concept of regime came from his readings of Plato and


41See Irving Kristol, Neoliberalism, 7. As noted in fn. 7, Kristol was not the first liberal turned conservative whose turn was in part influence byLeo Strauss. The story of Wilmoore Kendall and the transformation of his political philosophy at a mature age after reading Strauss’ Natural Right & History and Thoughts on Machiavelli is relevant in this regard.

Aristotle and pertained to the way a political order informed, and was itself informed by, the character of its citizens. A state’s regime does not pertain to the institutional structure of its government but rather refers to the psychology of the place, its habits and its customs. Importantly, Strauss resurrected the concept of tyranny, a regime common to classical political philosophy, and commented frequently on the inability of modern political science to recognize it for the evil it presents.43

One of the more obvious implications to the concept of regime is that different regimes will implement different foreign policies and thus, with regards to understanding international politics, the internal composition of a state’s politics - its regime - must form a critical part of any study. This may, in the case of failed regimes or rogue states which pose a potential threat to the United States, rightfully lead a student of international relations to consider a policy of regime change in lieu of containment as a potential solution. Just such a conclusion was put forward by neoconservatives throughout the 1990s and formed a pillar in the justification for the war in Iraq.44

Though the concept of regime is important to the formation of neoconservatism, it only skims the surface of Strauss’ contribution. For this, we must examine Strauss’ critique of positivism and what he calls the “new political science,” and how his critique provided neoconservatives with a philosophical defense for the rejection of moral relativism that is

43Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000). Strauss famously writes that “when we were brought face to face with tyranny – with a kind of tyranny that surpassed the boldest imagination of the most powerful thinkers of the past – our political science failed too recognize it.” (22).

44See, for example, the Open Letter to President Bill Clinton dated February 19th, 1998.
otherwise lacking from their more intuitive and visceral reaction to Kissinger and the new Left. In an effort to explain Strauss’ relevance on neoconservatism’s understanding of the perniciousness of relativism in politics, I take as my purchase point some of the more widely distributed writings by Strauss including, prominently, the chapter regarding Max Weber’s fact/value distinction in *Natural Right and History* and the polemic, “An Epilogue.”

In a general critique of the modern social and political science, Strauss argued that Weber’s distinction between facts and values is “alien to that understanding of political things which belongs to political life but it becomes necessary, it seems, when the citizen’s understanding of political things is replaced by the scientific understanding.” Because the scientific understanding is at the core of the new political science, and because, for Strauss, the new political science represents the orthodoxy of American universities, he felt obligated to challenge the claims made by positivism and historicism as articulated by its leading proponent, Max Weber.

The distinction between facts and values for Weber was an attempt to separate “a body of true propositions” (science) which transcended history, and which he viewed as superior to earlier forms of knowledge, from the historically contingent elements of “value ideas.” Yet for Strauss “these (true) propositions are only a part of social science. They are the result of scientific investigation or the answers to questions” with the questions themselves a result of one’s point of view or, in other words, one’s values - Western values to be precise. The distinction is therefore without merit. Furthermore, an emphasis on the

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distinction between facts and values leads inexorably to radical historicism for Strauss: “the substance of social science is radically historical; for it is the value ideas and the direction of interest which determine the whole conceptual framework of the social sciences.” 47 Weber’s radical historicism led to a denial “of any genuine knowledge of the Ought” or true value system because, in the multiplicity of value systems throughout the world, Weber saw only perpetual conflict irresolvable by human reason. 48

Strauss was not the only one to recognize this tension in Weber’s thought; Weber, too, recognized that the claim that subjective values not be permitted to interfere with objective science was plainly of a normative status and was not warranted by the scientific method he sought so hard to thematize. This contradiction had the effect of leaving what Weber called “cultural values,” which included politics, without a home in theory or, in other words, leaving politics and science forcibly separate from one another. Ironically, on a personal level, Weber continued to maintain an unshakeable belief in Kantian ethics as the only rational ethical system. 49

Ultimately, of course, politics was about power, for Weber, and all his talk of politics as competition, violence, struggle, and domination made it evident that politics for him was given meaning only through force of individual will or individual choice. The challenge for his methodology was one of finding the means to bridge the gap between empirical facts or science and choice or politics. In an effort to bridge this gap, Weber relied heavily on a

47NRH, 38.
48Ibid., 42.
49Strauss comments that what Weber “said about moral commands (his neo-Kantianism) is not much more than the residue of a tradition in which he was brought up and which, indeed, never ceased to determine him as a human being.” NRH, 43.
particular notion of leadership, specifically charismatic leadership, which allowed him to give meaning to theory albeit at the cost of relying on the pre-scientific, subjective values of the gifted few who could rise to positions of power.\(^{50}\)

An emphasis on power politics is nothing new to the realist school of international relations theory as celebrated realists like Thucydides and Hobbes also employed conceptions of power to help explain the origins of war and peace. However, in Weber, we find not only an influential contemporary expression of power politics, but, more importantly, we find very specific ways of dealing with the limits of modern social science that directly influenced a generation of 20\(^{th}\) Century realists. An example of this influence is found in the writings of Hans J. Morgenthau. From (1) a simultaneous (and contradictory) belief in a moral relativism\(^{51}\) that places an unsparing emphasis on individual choice and a belief in an objective Kantian ethics that has no practical (i.e. political) application to (2) the reliance on a conception of politics that is defined by violence and strife and is understood as inherently evil\(^{52}\) to (3) the belief that the social scientist must ultimately, and subjectively, weigh in to resolve the limits of a theory striving for objectivity in an effort to bridge the gap.

\(^{50}\)Sheldon Wolin, “Max Weber: Legitimation, Method, and the Politics of Theory,” Political Theory 9 (1981): 401-424. On the topic of Weberian science and charisma, Wolin concludes that “although Weber never explicitly connected science to charisma, there is a sufficient number of scattered clues to suggest that the connection was in his mind. Science is charisma ‘in a godless and prophetless time and it is displayed by the person with ‘an inward calling’ who can endure that ‘the world is disenchanted.’ It is for the chosen few, ‘the affair of intellectual aristocracy.’ It is, above all, charisma because science requires ‘inspiration.’ ‘It has nothing to do with any cold calculation.’” See Wolin, 417, internal quotes are from Weber.

\(^{51}\)For example, Morgenthau argues that though it may be characteristic of political expression to conceal the inherent struggle for power that defines politics with appeals to justice and morality, this is merely the result of “the actor on the political stage ‘playing an act’. ‘It has nothing to do with any cold calculation.’” See Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 89.

\(^{52}\)For example, Morgenthau claims that given the ubiquity of the will to power, it follows that politics is an unending struggle for power and that “political ethics is indeed the ethics of doing evil.” See Hans J. Morgenthau, Scientific Man v. Power Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 204 quoted in Michael Joseph Smith, Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 137.
between politics and science, we find in the work of Morgenthau a deep indebtedness to Max Weber. In turn, we find an expanded relevance to Strauss’ critique of Weber and the new political science that directly touches upon international relations theory, a critique that has important implications for the philosophical defense marshaled by neoconservatives.

Morgenthau’s relativism is not intended solely, as one might expect, to prove that all values are indeed relative but, rather, to establish the one true moral doctrine, realism. If sober consideration is given to the national interest as defined by power, according to Morgenthau, then the statesman may learn to adopt a “relativistic philosophy and tolerance of the other political systems and policies based on different moral principles” which “is the concomitant of policies based upon the national interest, and the precondition of a number of nations living side by side in mutual respect and peace.”

Moreover, realism, unlike the idealism of which Morgenthau is so critical, lacks the excessive zeal of its intellectual rival and thus may serve a salutary purpose in further moderating the goals of states and statesmen alike.

With the relativism and moral instruction of Weber and Morgenthau as backdrop, the meaning of Strauss’ charge in *Natural Right and History* that “many social scientists of our time seem to regard nihilism as a minor inconvenience which wise men would bear with equanimity, since it is the price one has to pay for obtaining that highest good, a truly

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53The statesman’s character is crucial in this regard as it is the statesman “who creates a new society out of his knowledge of the nature of man,” a knowledge that goes beyond a common understanding of justice and morality and about which the statesman is presumably educated by men like Morgenthau and Weber. It is the social scientist, after all, through an illumination of the rules of politics and by tailoring an education suitable for statesmen, who plays the pivotal role in overcoming the “psychological resistance” displayed by the unenlightened as they attempt to conceal the ugly truth about politics in order to “live contentedly” with themselves. See Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 221 quoted in Smith, 139; see also Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 15.

scientific social science” becomes clearer. One might go a step further and add that, in the context of Morgenthau’s theory of international morality (and in much of the subsequent academic work in international relations theory), moral relativism is the going price one has to pay for obtaining that highest good, world peace. This conclusion is one that an admiring reader of Strauss’ critique of Weber and the new political science may reasonably accept. If so, then it is reasonable to pause and consider the extent of the proposed “revaluation of all values” required to bring about the kind of international morality that leads to world peace.

With regard to the founders of neoconservatism and their students, it is my contention that this was precisely Strauss’ effect: his writings had a profound impact on those who became disillusioned with the morally relative foreign policy of the new Left and Kissinger’s Realpolitik and was instrumental in providing the basis for a philosophical defense or supplement to the neoconservative rejection of 20th C. realism (and idealism) in the pursuit of a foreign policy that registered with a more common and everyday (i.e. pre-scientific) understanding of politics and morality and which rests on an epistemology alien to the new political science. And while Strauss’ writings had other important consequences for the development of neoconservatism (e.g. the above concept of regime), it is his critique

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55 Strauss, NRH, 49.

56 Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 489. In questioning the will of nations to do what is necessary for world peace, Morgenthau writes that “they are not prepared to perform that revaluation of all values, that unprecedented moral and political revolution, which would force the nation from its throne and put the political organization of humanity on it.”

57 Kissinger’s views were enormously influenced by the historicism and relativism of the 20th Century as well as by Immanuel Kant. See Peter W. Dickson, Kissinger and the meaning of history (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

58 This is not meant to suggest that neoconservatism is representative of a Straussian foreign policy, whatever that may be. For a compelling interpretation of what a Straussian foreign policy might look like, see Thomas West, “Leo Strauss and American Foreign Policy,” Claremont Review of Books (Summer, 2004), http://claremont.org/publications/crb/id.1075/article_detail.asp.
of the relativism inherent to modern political and social science that, I argue in Chapter 3, had the most profound effect.

**Kenneth Waltz, Neorealism and the Neopositive Reaction**

The full story of this tumultuous period is not told if one fails to mention that neoconservatism was not the only political, philosophical and epistemological reaction to what Kissinger referred to as the period’s “stalemate, tension, and frustration.” Influenced by the obvious geopolitical tensions and the domestic upheaval, a second reaction crystallized within what Strauss called the new political science or between realism and neorealism. The genesis for this reaction rested on the failure of logical positivism and the fact/value distinction to live up to its ambition of creating a social science modeled on the success of the natural sciences. The beauty of logical positivism, and what helps explain its lure for social scientists over the years, was the deductive ease with which a theorist might move from observable laws to the construct of a general theory. Over time, however, an increasingly skeptical scientific and social science community no longer accepted logical positivism’s premise of a Humean notion of “fact” as an unproblematic equivalent to sense impression and the requirement that truth possess either a definitional (i.e. analytical or “language of science”) or observable quality. For reasons which have as much to do with

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59 Neoliberalism, as a tradition, emerges in large part as a reaction to neorealism but shares, as will be shown, many of the same epistemological assumptions made by the neorealists. Or, as Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin put it, neoliberalism or institutional theory is, “for better or worse…a half-sibling of neorealism.” See Keohane and Martin, “Institutional Theory, Endogeneity, and Deregulation,” quoted in Robert Jervis, “Realism, Neoliberalism and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate,” *International Security* 24 (1999): 43.

60 Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 18. This led to the belief that all other statements of either a non-analytical or non-observable quality were to be considered “cognitively meaningless” and dismissed as “nonsense.” The quote is from Rudolf Carnap who defines “nonsense” as statements that “do not possess a certain logical characteristic common to all proper scientific statements.”
the increasingly historical nature of thought in the social sciences as with further discoveries in the natural sciences that undermined the belief in the objective observation of phenomena, by the 1950s “positivism was virtually dead as a philosophical movement.”

The epistemological void created by the collapse of logical positivism was quickly filled in the works of international relations theorists by a neopositivistic understanding of truth and science built on the foundation that reality, per se, was unknowable, nay, unimaginable without a pre-existing theory of the world. Led by Kenneth Waltz and drawing extensively on the methodological writings of Imre Lakatos, neopositivism became the accepted paradigm of contemporary international relations theory, so much so that each respective school - neorealism, neoliberalism, critical theory and neo-marxism - has unwittingly taken turns criticizing their opponents for being unrepentant positivists who have somehow failed to accept the reality of a Lakatosian or neopositivistic epistemology.

Carnap was a member of the Vienna Circle and this definition of logical positivism mirrors the Circle's consensus view, a view that influenced the social sciences enormously. Putnam's Chapter 1 provides a brilliant overview of logical positivism and its limitations from the standpoint of a philosopher of science.


While neoconservatism came of age, in part, as a response to the relativism of logical positivism, the emergence of a neopositive epistemology allows us to gauge its continued relevance for contemporary theorists. When Kenneth Waltz writes that “data never speak for themselves,” rather, “what we think of reality is itself an elaborate conception constructed and reconstructed through the ages,” he expresses an even more radical form of historicism and relativism than that of his weberian and Vienna Circle predecessors.\(^6\) Waltz’s epistemology puts forth an understanding of truth that undermines the very predictive and explanatory power of science that his structuralism is intended to strengthen. Curiously, his moral and empirical relativism differs substantially from the materialist assumptions implicit to his own theory of how states operate in the international system. Beyond pointing to an obvious tension in Waltz’s thought, Waltz’s respective relativism and materialism differ markedly from the outlook of neoconservatism. Where neorealists like Waltz speak of how balancing defines state behavior, and how survival is the primary motivating force for states and individuals alike, neoconservatives believe in a wider spectrum of human and state passions and motivations. This naturally leads to varying degrees of emphasis on the relevance of diplomacy and force in the international system. If, for example, as neorealists believe, survival and stability are the aims of states and if the international system is structurally inclined toward self-balancing, then the emphasis is naturally on the diplomatic means necessary to achieve this balance with the least amount of carnage. This is especially true for Waltz in the nuclear age. Neoconservatives, on the

contrary, do not view international politics as structurally inclined to balance nor do they believe that states or other actors are unwilling to jeopardize their own survival for sake of their beliefs, metaphysical or otherwise. This chapter will revisit the topic of nuclear strategy and the Cold War while setting the foundation for a discussion about the war in Iraq in the fifth and final chapter.

This argument is fully consistent with a close reading of Waltz’s epistemological writings. It is also one that is broadly applicable to the contemporary field of international relations theory. Therefore, if the political consequences to logical positivism were unsatisfactory to neoconservatives, it follows that the neorealist response to the intellectual and political turmoil of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s only magnifies the divide as neopositivism serves to radicalize an already relativistic epistemology.

Iraq: The Neoconservative Moment

No study of neoconservatism and its relevance as a distinct tradition for the study of international relations would be complete if its influence on the Bush Doctrine and the war in Iraq were omitted. Neoconservatives have for years approached matters of deterrence, the use of preemptive force, the repudiation of moral relativism, and the moral charge of the

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United States in ways that easily lend themselves to a doctrine associated, by critics and proponents alike, with American exceptionalism. Together with the focus by a younger generation of neoconservatives during the 1990s on concepts like regime change, benevolent hegemony and a conscious distancing from realism and its skepticism regarding the moral objectives of foreign policy, the Bush Doctrine carries the obvious imprint of neoconservatism. As articulated by the President in the National Security Strategy of the United States in September 2002, in his speech to Congress on September 20, 2001, the State of The Union Address of January 20, 2002 together with his West Point and American Enterprise Institute speeches of June 2002 and February 2003, the Bush Doctrine prepared the way for neoconservative principles to become the standing foreign policy of the United States.

In this final chapter, I propose splitting the debate surrounding the Bush Doctrine and the war in Iraq into two, summarizing first the justifications for the war whose substance and origin are neoconservative and examining the environment in which these ideas were received and debated by representatives of the other theoretical traditions, principally realism and neorealism. Realists, almost to a theorist, were deeply opposed to the war in Iraq. The question that I think needs answering is on what basis were neoconservative arguments received by traditions constructed on such fundamentally opposed political, philosophical,

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69Norman Podhoretz, “World War IV,” 26-27. Most analysts do not include the September 2001 speech to Congress as part of the doctrine, but for Podhoretz this represents its point of departure.

70See the open letter to the New York Times, September 26th, 2002, signed by John Meirsheimer, Kenneth Waltz, Alexander George, Robert Jervis, Thomas Schelling, and Stephen Walt. Henry Kissinger was one exception to this group of realists as he was a conditional proponent of the war in Iraq. See Henry Kissinger, “Phase II and Iraq,” The Washington Post, January 13, 2002.
epistemological and moral foundations? On what basis did realists and neorealists reject the proposition that the war in Iraq was central not only to the war on terror but also to US efforts to arrest the proliferation of nuclear weapons (especially the risk that terrorist organizations might be granted access to such weapons by rogue states like Iraq) when realists and neorealists understand the matter of deterrence, state behavior and rationality in such diametrically opposed ways? Going still further, how were neoconservative arguments about US exceptionalism, benevolent hegemony, and the belief that the internal composition of states significantly impacts the health of the international system received by traditions which emphasize the dynamics of the international system over internal state politics and which maintain that all states, the US included, are driven exclusively by a desire for survival and hegemony with world peace a sole consequence of naturally occurring balances of power?  

The second half of the debate has to do with the principles of neoconservatism and whether the Bush Doctrine and the war in Iraq have extended these principles to their breaking point. Following Francis Fukuyama, it is right to ask whether this younger generation of neoconservatives have overextended themselves in their reliance on militarism and US exceptionalism. Is it true, as Fukuyama suggests, that the total US victory in the Cold War, won, in part, on the basis of policies and tactics advocated by neoconservatives and opposed by most of the bien pensants of the US and European foreign policy elite, has left neoconservatives “psychologically handicapped” when dealing with a post-9/11 world and

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global terrorism to say nothing of European and global intransigence at US exceptionalism? Is it true that neoconservatives have become so drunk with success that they have put aside their own skepticism regarding social engineering - dating back to the days of the Great Society projects of the Johnson Administration - and now advocate complex nation-building with a breezy casualness bordering on recklessness? Crucially, given the accusation that their opponent’s theories are terminally weakened by a reliance on “galloping abstractions” (Irving Kristol), has the neoconservative emphasis on risk, no matter how small or unlikely, led, in equal measure, to the reckless abandon of the very principal on which their views of the world are founded, common sense, in favor of their own artful abstractions?

Fukuyama, a one-time neoconservative himself and a man as closely married as anyone to the concept that there exists a universal desire for modernity which, over time, leads inexorably to liberal democracy, is well positioned to judge whether the proposition that the power of the US military should be deployed to quicken the pace toward more representative forms of government across the globe is a sign of overreach. There is, of course, nothing inherently imprudent to a doctrine of preventive war and democracy promotion. It is, rather, as Fukuyama readily acknowledges, a matter of emphasis and consequence. And yet, when Paul Wolfowitz, as Deputy Secretary of Defense, testifies before Congress that the overthrow of a 35 year-old tyranny will be quick and easy while openly dismissive of the concerns expressed by an experienced Army chief of staff that this will emphatically not be the case (and the Army chief’s opinion is validated by subsequent events), this has the effect of not only demonstrating the difficulty of translating political ideas into action but of also raising the ugly specter of hubris and bolstering Fukuyama’s
Disagreements over tactical matters like troop levels, however mistaken, do not, in and of themselves, discredit the strategic value of the Bush Doctrine and the decision to invade Iraq. But when coupled with a litany of other tactical and strategic mistakes relating to the aftermath of the invasion, it does raise serious questions about the wisdom of relying so heavily on the US military as a transformative force for good in natively hostile regions of the world. It is against this backdrop, while mindful of the strategic, moral and political arguments informing the Bush Doctrine and the war in Iraq, that the merits of a neoconservative foreign policy must be measured.


74 In fairness to neoconservatives like William Kristol, military decisions were the province of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, a man with no obvious ties to neoconservatism, and someone of whom neoconservatives have been openly critical. See William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Too Few Troops,” The Weekly Standard, April 26, 2004.
CHAPTER 1

THERE IS NO REST: ALBERT WOHLSTETTER AND THE STRATEGIC BASIS OF NEOCONSERVATISM

One of the distinctive features of neoconservatism comes by way of Albert Wohlstetter and his contributions to the field of strategic studies. Wohlstetter’s influence on neoconservatism received scant attention over the years, though, recently, this has changed as scholars and the press look to explain the Bush Administration’s motives for invading Iraq.\(^75\) The attention is long overdue as several of Wohlstetter’s students - Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Zalmay Khalilizad - have enjoyed prominent roles in major policy debates ranging from the anti-détente coalition of the 1970s to the Reagan military buildup of the 1980s to the Gulf War to, most recently, providing the intellectual support for the US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath.

Recent accounts of Wohlstetter’s influence on neoconservatism rightfully focus on his emphasis for empirical rigor in the field of strategic studies and his opposition to the theory of mutually assured destruction. Thoughtful strategy regarding the use of nuclear weapons, according to Wohlstetter, demanded proficiency in the details of numerous


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weapons systems - everything from performance related issues to feasibility and costs analyses – which frequently require extended periods of time to develop and “stand a good chance of being opposed by other governments.”76 As one of his more accomplished students noted years later, his was “a very fact-based approach to policy,” one that understood strategy to follow from empirical findings and not creative theoretical constructs.77 This seemingly “cold-blooded” analytical approach helped lay the strategic foundation for the rise of neoconservatism while also deepening its moral, political, and philosophical basis.78 I argue in this chapter that to fully appreciate Wohlstetter’s influence on the founding generation of neoconservatism, we must contrast Wohlstetter’s analytical approach - what he called “opposed-systems design” - to the major scholarly emphasis during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s on game theory and the dynamics of bargaining. It is only by understanding Wohlstetter’s specific approach to strategic studies and his opposition to the doctrine of assured destruction (and its political corollaries, détente and arms control) that we may grasp the strategic foundation to what, by the early 1970s, was the founding moment of neoconservatism.

In this chapter, I argue that Wohlstetter’s influence on neoconservatism became most pronounced during policy debates regarding the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) negotiations under the Nixon and Ford Administrations. It was through his active involvement in the policy debates regarding arms control and détente that Wohlstetter’s combination of common sense thinking and detailed empirical analysis supplied


78Quote from Ibid.
neoconservatism with a strategic foundation that strengthened their existing moral, political and philosophical beliefs. It was precisely the combination of hard facts and common sense that made Wohlstetter’s appeal to the founding generation of neoconservatives a natural fit: it mirrored their preferred method of political debate. I argue that in at least six paired debates, ranging from the delicacy of the nuclear balance of terror to the relevance of common sense in theory construction to the problems of mirror imaging, Wohlstetter’s approach provided neoconservatives with a conceptual framework for strategic thought that distanced itself forcefully from the frameworks of other, equally influential thinkers like Bernard Brodie, Thomas Schelling and Henry Kissinger.

The SALT negotiations pitted Wohlstetter, his students, and Cold War liberals like Senator Jackson against Democrats and Republicans who shared the view that the doctrine of assured destruction was a sufficient deterrent against a Soviet nuclear attack. Mutual assured destruction (MAD), as it became known, provided the intellectual basis for the negotiations and made it politically acceptable for its architects to agree to both quantitative and qualitative restrictions on the development and production of US nuclear weapon systems. Senator Jackson’s intuitive opposition to arms control was bolstered by the strategic thought of Albert Wohlstetter and his students, some of whom were members of the senator’s staff. Together with several of the founding members of neoconservatism, including Norman Podhoretz and Irving Kristol, the Director for the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Undersecretary, Fred Iklé, a protégé of Wohlstetter’s, and Paul Wolfowitz, a junior official with the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency at the time and

a former student of Wohlstetter’s, this alliance orchestrated a campaign to expose what they perceived as the strategic and moral flaws of MAD. Their aim was to discredit arms control and the larger policy of détente. It is a goal they achieved with considerable success.

It was the opinion of the Jackson/Wohlstetter/neoconservative alliance that arms control provided false comfort to the leaders of the United States as it robbed them of a solid strategic foundation from which to confront an ever aggressive Soviet Union in exchange for, at best, diplomatic gains. Their efforts during this period culminated in the 1976 CIA sponsored Team “B” analysis of the intelligence community’s understanding of Soviet behavior and nuclear policy.

Team “B” was formed with the aim of critically evaluating the CIA’s (Team “A”) analytical and institutional framework for dealing with the Soviet military and nuclear threat. Team “B” concluded that the “West’s self-imposed restraints” regarding nuclear policy went unreciprocated by the Soviet Union because Soviet “military doctrine (was) measured not in terms of assured destruction but in those of a war-fighting and war-winning capability.” To Team “B,” the evidence of Soviet intentions pointed to “an undeviating…commitment to what is euphemistically called ‘the worldwide triumph of socialism’” and therefore the logic of MAD, something which so many strategic theorists believed to be universal, was, to the contrary, limited to Western academia and government officials. The CIA’s institutional and

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80The alliance also included non-neoconservatives like the Secretary of Defense under Ford, Donald Rumsfeld.


82See Friedman, *The Neconervative Revolution*, Chapter 8. Wolfowitz was the author of a section of Team “B” dealing with the importance of intermediate-range missiles to the Soviet Union; see also Kaufmann, *Henry M. Jackson* (London: University of Washington, 2000), Chapter 15.
analytical bias was, in their opinion, guilty of “mirror-imaging.” In an effort to explain this bias, Team “B” emphasized three contributing factors: “political pressures” which sought to “minimize the Soviet buildup because of its implications for détente;” “bureaucratic rivalry;” and the “habit of viewing each Soviet weapons program...in isolation from the others.”

But while all three factors had an unquestionable influence on the intelligence community’s national intelligence estimates (NIEs), to fully understand the assumptions inherent to the intelligence community’s bias against which Team “B” and the larger alliance of Wohlstetter, Jackson, and the neoconservatives was directed, it is essential to revisit the specific contributions by Albert Wohlstetter to the strategic debates of the preceding three decades.

**Has Strategy Hit a Dead-End? Wohlstetter, Brodie & Schelling and the Logic of Preemption**

The thrust of Team “B’s” findings was representative of Wohlstetter’s contributions to the field of strategic studies which, when taken as a whole, distinguished him from the other major figures at RAND, theorists like Bernard Brodie and Thomas Schelling, and much of the scholarly community as well as leading government officials in successive US administrations. Wohlstetter’s contributions can be summarized in the following six paired debates: (i) in opposition to the commonly held belief that nuclear weapons created a stalemate in the superpower balance of terror, Wohlstetter emphasized instead the delicacy of the balance and the concomitant need for reducing the vulnerability of US strategic forces.
and bolstering its defenses;84 (ii) when fellow theorists at RAND argued that strategy had hit a dead end as a result of the perceived nuclear stalemate, Wohlstetter’s empirical studies highlighted the faulty logic of such conclusions as effective strategy was the result, not of bargaining studies or game theory, but of the responsiveness of various weapon systems to plausible conflict scenarios and the real world options this provided decision makers;85 (iii) while many in academia and government were comfortable foregoing the introduction of new technologies which might, because of the perceived action-reaction phenomenon believed to be inherent to the arms race, destabilize an otherwise stable balance of terror, Wohlstetter was steadfast in his avowal for greater flexibility in the design and construct of weapons systems which might, one day, afford greater precision and improved efficiencies for both conventional and nuclear weapon systems (e.g. Tomahawk);86 (iv) whereas others became convinced that the logic of fighting wars in a post-nuclear world had irrevocably changed from the pursuit of victory to the deterrence of aggression, Wohlstetter failed to appreciate the distinction and argued forcefully that the two were intimately connected;87 (v) though theories of deterrence such as assured destruction relied on a counterintuitive logic, Wohlstetter never wavered in his belief that theory, whether in a post-nuclear world or not,


represented a supplement to, rather than a rebuke of, common sense and intuition; and, lastly, though many theorists and government officials became so convinced in the veracity of these counterintuitive theories that they felt it was but a matter of time before the Soviet Union was compelled to submit equally to its logic, Wohlstetter believed that the best way to understand Soviet motives was to look at their actions and to assume an intelligent leadership that was capable of identifying and exploiting the weaknesses of US and Western forces and to plan accordingly.

The larger narrative of strategic studies during the 1950s and 1960s was marked by a departure from the logic of saturation bombing inherited from the US Strategic Air Command’s (SAC) experience during WWII to one of flexible response (predicated on a more graduated series of retaliatory options) and back, full circle, to a reliance on assured destruction as the best means for deterring Soviet aggression. This reliance on what may be called “simple” deterrence held (and still holds) a certain intuitive appeal. The amount of destructive power that would be unleashed in a nuclear exchange between the superpowers was so overwhelming that it was only logical for political leaders to be deterred by the prospect. In the face of such overwhelming destruction, the purpose of nuclear weapons, both militarily and politically, was open to extreme skepticism. Yet, for Wohlstetter, while the reliance of SAC on massive retaliation was understandable in the late 1940s and early

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1950s, given the nuclear and air superiority of US forces, the validity of this strategic posture evaporated once the Soviet Union developed nuclear weapons and the ability to deliver them abroad. What was needed instead was a detailed study of force structure and vulnerability that began with the twin assumptions of an intelligent adversary who might conceivably launch a small scale attack that exploited US weaknesses. But others, like Brodie and Schelling, while in full agreement on the need to reduce SAC vulnerability, became convinced that since “war and obliteration (were) now completely synonymous” the threat of massive retaliation was the most efficacious, if not exclusive, means to keeping the peace in the nuclear age.\textsuperscript{91}

Brodie’s emphasis on massive retaliation derived from his increased confidence regarding the robustness of the balance of terror. Writing years later, he admitted that he could “never accept the implication of his (Wohlstetter’s) title – that the balance of terror between the Soviet Union and the United States ever has been or ever could be ‘delicate’.” The reason: “human inhibitions of taking monumental risks.”\textsuperscript{92} Brodie’s faith in the resilience of the balance of terror by the 1970s was to no small extent due to the fact that after 25 years no nuclear exchange had yet taken place.\textsuperscript{93} Nonetheless, Brodie’s strategic thought was from the very outset more pessimistic than Wohlstetter’s regarding the military purpose of nuclear weapons.

\textsuperscript{91}Brodie, \textit{The Absolute Weapon}, 21.

\textsuperscript{92}Brodie, “Development of Nuclear Strategy,” 69.

\textsuperscript{93}This view of human nature came nearly two decades after Brodie himself seriously considered the risk of preemptive war, or the willingness to assume precisely this type of “monumental risk.” Compare the final paragraph of Bernard Brodie, “The Anatomy of Deterrence,” \textit{World Politics} 11 (1959), where he writes of the imperative to reduce the “intolerable mutual menace.” Credit for pointing out the contradiction belongs to Marc Trachtenberg.
The sheer power of thermonuclear weapons, for Brodie, meant that in no uncertain terms a full nuclear exchange between the superpowers was the equivalent of national suicide. Suicide could not be a rational national objective since it violated Clausewitz’s maxim that war and politics were closely linked, that war was “planned violence and therefore controlled.”\textsuperscript{94} To control a nuclear exchange therefore meant that it must be limited in scope. But how does one control the scope of an exchange when the purpose of war is about winning, or preparing for total victory? If a full exchange of one’s arsenal meant defeat in the most stark and obvious terms, then the objective of war in the nuclear age had to be about something other than victory. This is what Brodie meant when he wrote that strategy had “hit a dead end.”\textsuperscript{95} Strategy as it had been known historically no longer followed from political or military aims but rather from the nature of technology itself. Thus what begins as a technological revolution results in a no less important revolution in military and political strategy for Brodie. “Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.”\textsuperscript{96}

In order to limit military objectives to averting war as opposed to preparing for victory meant that the range of behavior and posturing available to military and political leaders had to be more narrowly defined. It meant too that a novel, counterintuitive


\textsuperscript{95}Brodie, “How War Become Absurd: Strategy Hits a Dead End.”

\textsuperscript{96}Brodie, \textit{The Absolute Weapon}, 76.
conception of war had to be recognized by military and political leaders as the operative principle moving forward. But what happened in the event of a shooting war?

There existed a tension in Brodie’s thought that is typical of the logical constructs employed by many of his contemporaries in the 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, there was no acceptable safeguard against a nuclear war and so everything had to be done in order to ensure stability, including a policy of assured destruction. His emphasis in this scenario was on the period “before hostilities” and required, for example, targeting the enemy’s cities in order to “provide for the maximum automaticity as well as certainty of response, and to lose no opportunity to let the enemy know that we have done these things.”97 Conversely, deterrence might fail and what seemed reasonable prior to open conflict would be pure folly if implemented once hostilities started. So foolish, in fact, that a nuclear adversary is not likely to believe the threat. In the case of open conflict, therefore, some kind of controlled response and concept of limited war in accordance with Clausewitz’s maxim had to be applied. The targeting of an enemy’s cities was now unacceptable. Would it not, Brodie asked, be better to target military instillations since “the ability to destroy cities confers more military advantage as a threat than the actual destruction of them is likely to have?”98 Cities needed to be preserved for their hostage value so that nuclear war might become an exercise in bargaining and risk taking and, as such, retain some political value. But is it reasonable to expect that the military and political leadership can actively prepare for a policy of massive retaliation and yet implement a strategy of controlled response at the moment of crisis? Is it


98Ibid. Italics in text.
reasonable, moreover, to expect that the combined policy will have the desired effect of deterring the Soviet Union? Brodie leaves the matter unresolved.

It is unsurprising, given the enormity of the task, that the tension in Brodie’s strategic thought was not resolved in a more satisfactory manner. How does one, after all, make the threat of a massive nuclear response believable if it logically means self-destruction? From Wohlstetter’s perspective, the tension was to remain irresolvable if Brodie insisted on approaching such a complex challenge from the safe distance of pen and argument while scrupulously avoiding the heavy lifting of detailed empirical research.

In lieu of abstract analytical constructs that sought to demonstrate the counterintuitive nature of modern warfare, Wohlstetter chose instead to visit SAC bases to get a first hand look at the defensive installations in place - warning times, force hardening measures, readiness - and to determine the extent to which they were sufficient to protect the strategic forces of the United States against enemy attack. He meant by this approach to provide damage assessments for a nuclear attack on a scale that intelligent leaders of the Soviet Union might reasonably initiate. Wohlstetter thought in terms of small scale attacks that could easily be executed without warning or sufficient time for US forces to prepare. If damage assessments were possible this meant that measurement was also possible, according to Wohlstetter, and that a nuclear exchange could conceivably be of a finite and limited scale. If such a nuclear exchange might reasonably occur, then it was imperative that SAC understand how vulnerable its forces were and, more specifically, how specific weapon

99Brodie admits as early as 1953 that the threat of massive retaliation is not likely to be believed by a nuclear adversary, at least in any conflict that involves an attack by an adversary that is “less than massive aggression.” See Ibid. He goes on to insist that “it would be tactically and factually wrong to assure the enemy in advance…that we would in no case take off against him until we felt some bombs on our cities and airfields.” See 176.

100Wohlstetter et al., Selection and Use of Strategic Air Bases.
systems would fare in a nuclear attack and what steps might be reasonably taken to assure their increased protection and readiness.

In 1959, with the publication of the “The Delicate Balance of Power,” Wohlstetter’s views became widely known. The article had an enormous impact on the strategic thinking of his colleague’s at RAND, especially Schelling’s, while openly critical of other theorists, some of whom, like Henry Kissinger, would go on to have an enormous impact as policy makers. On the matter of force vulnerability, and the need to remedy it, all three theorists were in agreement; Brodie had, in fact, conceptually addressed the matter of US vulnerability as early as the late 1940s. On the matter of what to do to increase the effectiveness of the US nuclear deterrent, however, Wohlstetter’s article signaled a point of departure between him and his students, on the one hand, and Brodie, Schelling and their students, on the other. Looking back, it further signaled the point at which strategic thought in the United States began to permanently divide over the doctrine of assured destruction. A majority of theorists and government officials eventually embraced this doctrine (either implicitly or explicitly) as the most effective deterrent against a potential Soviet attack, whereas a minority opinion, led by Wohlstetter and joined some years later by the neoconservatives, embraced advancements in weapons technology of all types and a robust military as the best means for a secure and credible second-strike capability.

101 Wohlstetter, “The Delicate Balance of Terror.”


103 Brodie, The Absolute Weapon.
Wohlstetter’s focus in his balance of terror article was on the problem of vulnerability and of quantitatively measuring so-called opposed nuclear weapons systems. The two were intimately connected for Wohlstetter. To properly begin the task of addressing the vulnerability of US strategic forces, one had to first grapple with quantitative measures regarding weapons systems, military bases, and their effectiveness and/or limitations. Casual assumptions about such measures did not suffice. Such assumptions formed the basis to what he called the “common view,” which held that regardless of the force structures of the superpowers, “the defender’s hydrogen bombs will with certainty be visited on the aggressor” and that the “damage done” will always be “terrible enough for deterrence, and any more would be simply redundant.”104 The logic of this argument raised questions even if one assumed that a small nuclear force would survive an enemy attack intact. For example, what happens if the targets the defender aims at in retaliation are sheltered? Or, to take a more likely scenario, what happens if the aggressor’s attack was effective in destroying some of the defender’s missiles while the remaining - assuming that some of the planes were in the air at the time of attack and capable of penetrating the enemy’s defenses105 - delivered a retaliatory blow that was too limited in scope to represent an effective deterrent?

Choices needed to be made by policy makers and these choices, for Wohlstetter, had to be based on a combination of fact and good judgment. The latter required a healthy dose of skepticism regarding costs and delivery timelines as weapons systems do not generally become operational on schedule or within the allocated budget. These constraints


105This was not a safe assumption in the 1950s as the Symington Committee concluded in 1956: “US bombers averaged 31 hours of flying per month, which is about 4 percent of the average 732-hour month.” Quote in Ibid., 218
determined the hard numbers of weapons systems deployed as well as their effectiveness. All of these problems are quantitative in nature, extremely complex and not suitable for analysis by way of the casual assumptions employed by most theorists. In fact “if (these complexities) were more widely understood, (they) would discourage the oracular confidence of writers on the subject of deterrence.”

To guarantee the ability of the United States to strike back if attacked, a comprehensive second-strike capability had to satisfy the following requirements, Wohlstetter thought:

(a) a stable, “steady-state” peacetime operation within feasible budgets…They must have the ability (b) to survive enemy attacks, (c) to make and communicate the decision to retaliate, (d) to reach enemy territory with fuel enough to compete their mission, (e) to penetrate enemy active defenses, that is, fighters and surface-to-air missiles, and (f) to destroy the target in spite of any “passive” civil defense in the form of dispersal or protective construction or evacuation of the target itself.

Each step along the way to a secure second-strike capability had to be considered in all of its operational detail. This was crucial for Wohlstetter because there existed several plausible scenarios that might compel the Soviet Union to strike first, such as a “disastrous defeat in a peripheral war, loss of key satellites with danger of revolt spreading - possibly to Russia itself - or fear of an attack by ourselves.” And if attacked, the United States had to possess the means to respond without at the same time committing national suicide. Unlike Brodie, whose argument was stalemated by the seemingly impassible contradiction between deterring a nuclear exchange and responding to one, Wohlstetter offered an elegant solution.

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106Ibid., 216.
107Ibid.
108Ibid., 222.
by conceiving of plausible scenarios permitting or necessitating limited nuclear exchanges. In the context of these scenarios, deterrence was to be achieved by a combination of force protection and an effective second-strike capability. A flexible range of options was intended to provide US political leaders with a choice, other than national suicide, while also enhancing the nuclear deterrent and reducing the risks of accidental war. In Wohlstetter’s words, “a protected retaliatory capability has a stabilizing influence not only in deterring rational attack, but also in offering every inducement to both powers to reduce the chance of accidental war.”

The logic of preemption was equally central to Schelling’s thought though it found resolution by way of a reliance on the doctrine of assured-destruction as the best means for enhancing superpower stability. With his scholarly training as an economist, Schelling emphasized the concept of risk manipulation as the cardinal feature to effective deterrence. Schelling sought to unravel the various threads inherent in the logic of preemption by asking the question, what could possibly induce a country to attack first when the retaliatory forces of its enemy ensured its very own destruction? The reason one might commit such an irrational act was due to the “reciprocal fear of surprise attack” based on the circular logic of “he thinks we think he thinks we think…he thinks we think he’ll attack; so he thinks we shall; so we will; so we must.”

What, then, was one to do? The first thing to do was to understand more clearly the military objectives of a nuclear war; the second thing was to bargain one’s way into a balance of power that enhanced stability by reducing the perceived vulnerability of both sides. Both

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109Ibid., 230.

courses of action assumed that the “degree of risk could be manipulated” and that the “quest for ‘stability’” was possible. These courses of action also pointed to the means of resolving the evident tension in Brodie’s earlier writings. But how?

For Schelling, the “reciprocal fear of surprise attack” is a danger that “resides in the very character of modern weapons.” Because of their destructive power, an enemy’s nuclear weapons, if employed first, might likely destroy one’s ability to counterattack and vice versa. But the destructiveness of nuclear weapons also made it possible to conceive of military objectives in a radically altered way. Like Brodie, Schelling too concluded that the military must now concentrate its efforts on not losing, as opposed to winning, a war. Target selection had to be revised because the industrial capacity of cities no longer played the essential role it once did in force mobilization; nor was the mobilization of military personnel any longer an essential feature to nuclear war planning. This meant for Schelling, as it did for Brodie, that if hostilities broke out cities represented punitive and coercive targets better served strategically by their hostage value than by their actual destruction. Target selection might then be useful as a bargaining tool for the manipulation of risk which, when properly calibrated, could produce lasting stability. The emphasis on bargaining was Schelling’s lasting contribution to strategic thought. “Military strategy is bargaining strategy,” he wrote in 1961. “It involves potential force more than actual force;” deterrence should not

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be understood as “just a threat” but rather as an evaluation of “a potential enemy’s intentions” with an aim to “influence them through our military posture.”

Schelling’s revision of centuries old military strategy led to a new causal explanation for war, one that understood military factors (read technological) to take precedence over political factors. Military factors were more important because the fear of the enemy striking first was a logical consequence of the destructiveness of nuclear weapons. Their destructive power was so immediate that, unless controlled by formal arms control agreements, the international balance of power would remain inherently destabilized as nuclear weapons “put a premium on haste.” To break free from the logic of preemption and move forcefully toward what he called “stabilized mutual deterrence” required, as it did for Wohlstetter, an emphasis on improving warning capabilities and reducing the vulnerability of weapons systems in order to limit the impact, and therefore the incentive, of a surprise attack. But what most impressed Schelling about Wohlstetter’s balance of terror article was not the need for reducing force vulnerability, but rather the logic of preemption. This made it imperative to influence an enemy’s behavior by way of bargaining tactics designed to manipulate risk. This led directly to Schelling’s support for arms control, i.e., “limitations of weapons systems themselves,” “their use and deployment,” as well as other “cooperative measures” like an “agreement to develop and to acquire weapons of a character relatively better for retaliation than for achieving surprise.”


114Ibid., 723.

115Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin, Strategy and Arms Control, 12.
With his support for arms control married to his belief that the pursuit of “‘stabilized mutual deterrence’” was a function of the calibrated manipulation of risk, Schelling’s thought was a precursor to the doctrine of assured destruction and offered intellectual support for the policy of détente under Nixon. MAD, of course, became in a very short span of time widely accepted by most of the leading political figures in the 1960s and 1970s, amongst whom we find Robert McNamara and Henry Kissinger, as well as many intellectual leaders in the scientific and academic communities.116

From Flexible Response to MAD

Robert McNamara began his term as Secretary of Defense deeply committed to the policy of flexible response and the imperative of reducing the vulnerability of US nuclear forces. His thinking was consistent with most of the strategic thought coming out of RAND in the 1950s. The objective of flexible response was to achieve the means to respond effectively if deterrence failed. It incorporated the concepts of escalation dominance (which emphasized the need to respond to all levels of a nuclear war) and counterforce (which targeted an adversary’s bombers and missiles and not their cities so as to provide an incentive for an adversary to confine its own attacks to American military targets) and sought to minimize the vulnerability of US forces by aggressively speeding up the deployment of new weapons systems like the Polaris submarine. But by 1963

116Ibid. For an example of scientific leaders lending their support to the doctrine and its formal strictures regarding certain advanced weaponry, see Herbert York and Jerome Wieser, “National Security and the Nuclear Test Ban,” Scientific American, October, 1964; for other academic publications at around the same time in support of assured destruction and arms control, see Hedley Bull, The Control of the Arms Race (New York: Praeger, 1961).
McNamara’s thinking began to slowly shift toward the doctrine of assured destruction and with it a policy of arms control.  

The doctrine of assured destruction was employed by McNamara as a yardstick of sorts to answer the question, how much force was enough? It neatly captured for Congress and the public the sheer destructive power of nuclear weapons and how indiscriminate their use would be in a war between the superpowers. McNamara never proposed using nuclear weapons in a manner consistent with the doctrine of assured destruction and continued to mention in his public speeches the policy of flexible response as the best posture for US strategic defense. Yet by relying on the doctrine of assured destruction as a measure, McNamara was susceptible to its logic and, on more than one occasion, adopted the distinction, by way of Schelling, between offensive and defensive weapon systems and their corollary of “first-strike weapons” and “second-strike weapons” (i.e. “weapons of a character relatively better for retaliation than for achieving surprise”). For example, the conceptual framework of assured destruction bolstered McNamara’s skepticism regarding the purpose of ballistic missile technology (ABM). He saw the ABM not as a means to reduce force vulnerability or protect population centers from limited...
nuclear attack (accidental or intentional) but rather as enhancing first-strike capabilities and thus destabilizing to the balance of terror.\textsuperscript{120}

“Rhetoric has an effect even on rhetoricians,” Wohlstetter later wrote regarding the gradual evolution of McNamara’s thought.\textsuperscript{121} Going from a policy of flexible response to MADCAP\textsuperscript{122} to MAD (and then, once out of office, to a call for a policy of no use of nuclear weapons even in the event of an attack on the United States), McNamara’s evolution mirrored those of many strategic theorists and represented for Wohlstetter a degradation of the US nuclear deterrent. McNamara’s reliance on MAD was an effort to enhance the stability of the balance of terror and move away from the unpredictability of flexible response and the perceived “action-reaction” phenomena to which it gave rise. This led directly to a policy of arms control of both a self-imposed and negotiated variety.\textsuperscript{123} For proponents of arms control and MAD, the two were intimately connected - “stability’s handmaiden is MAD,” John Newhouse wrote admiringly a few years later\textsuperscript{124} - and the ABM

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\textsuperscript{120}William Kauffman, \textit{The McNamara Strategy}. See 229-232 for a discussion of the feasibility and destabilizing character of ABM. A distinction between thick and thin deployment should be drawn here as ABM was funded by Congress during the Johnson Administration with the explicit understanding by McNamara and Johnson that it would not be deployed as a thick defense against the Soviet Union. It was, however, approved for deployment as a thin defense against China in 1967 as a result, ironically, of Soviet insistence on pursuing its own ABM even in the face of US reluctance. In 1983, under the Reagan Administration, its deployment as a thick defense against the Soviet Union was approved. See Ibid., 51, fn. 10, and Freedman, 759.


\textsuperscript{122}MADCAP was Wohlstetter’s term for the MAD doctrine minus the targeting of cities. For an opposing interpretation regarding the evolution of McNamara’s thought see Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., “MAD and U.S. Strategy” in Henry D. Sokolski, ed., \textit{Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Deterrence, its Origins and Practice} (Washington, D.C.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), \url{http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/} (Sept. 7, 2008).


\textsuperscript{124}John Newhouse, \textit{Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT}, 18
controversy of the late 1960s was a prime example of the fear that new weapons systems could inspire.

**Stability, Action-Reaction and the ABM**

The ABM exemplified for many strategic theorists and government officials the pernicious effects of what was called the “action-reaction” phenomenon inherent to the superpower arms race. For Brodie, Schelling, and McNamara, because of bureaucratic and institutionalized mistrust, the United States and the Soviet Union had, by the 1960s, become trapped in a “classical” arms race “where the focus is more on competition itself than on any high or imminent expectation of war.”

Explaining his thinking to Congress in 1967, McNamara had this to say: “Whatever their intentions or our intentions, actions - or even realistically potential actions - on either side relating to the build-up of nuclear forces necessarily trigger reactions on the other side.” Therefore, “were we to deploy a heavy ABM system through the United States, the Soviets would clearly be strongly motivated to so increase their offensive capability as to cancel out defensive advantage.”

Given that war with the Soviet Union was not imminent and that McNamara understood the ABM to be deeply flawed and certain to prove porous against a massive Soviet attack (the sole standard by which he measured its effectiveness), the action-reaction phenomenon served no higher strategic purpose. So why bother.

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Wohlstetter fought very hard to preserve funding for ballistic missile defense, even testifying before the Senate in 1969, and fought with equal vigor against what he understood to be the grotesque logic of assured destruction and its emphasis on the proposition that “offense is good, defense is bad” and “killing cities is good, killing weapons is bad.” Wohlstetter never accepted the distinction between offensive and defensive weapons or, analogously, the distinction between “first-strike weapons” and “second-strike weapons.” These terms “apply to military forces as whole connected parts...in their interaction with adversary military forces as a whole;” at most, according to Wohlstetter, “they designate system properties, not attributes of individual weapons.” To believe that weapons systems fall neatly into categories of analytical purity is, quite simply, wrong as a matter of fact. Not only do weapons systems possess inherent “dual use” capability, but as complex systems the parts are too intertwined with the whole to be treated as distinct nuggets that may be sacrificed without doing damage to the system itself. The distinction also obfuscates the political differences between adversaries, treating threats by one country as implicitly equal to the threats by another. But not all arms competitions are created equal. The French and British strategic forces, for instance, are not perceived in the same way by the United States as are the strategic forces of the Soviet Union for the simple reason that the latter is its enemy and the former are its allies.

127This is consistent with the majority opinion. Brodie, for one, dismissed the ABM as simply a “wasteful expenditure.” See Brodie, “Development of Nuclear Strategy,” 71.


130Ibid., 13.

With regard to the ballistic missile debate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, opponents of ABM development made three distinct arguments which relate both to matters of fact and consequence. The first argument made by Brodie, McNamara and others was that the ABM shield would not work from a technological and systems perspective. For Wohlstetter, their contention was without merit unless specific time periods and roles were defined. There are some tasks - like responding to a limited nuclear attack, accidental or otherwise - that a ballistic missile system could have been effective against and other tasks to which technological advancement may one day make it effective. A second argument against the ABM, one that Secretary McNamara made in his 1967 testimony to Congress, was that the development and production of a ballistic missile system would contribute to an ever-expanding arms race. But the historical record, even at the time of McNamara’s testimony, did not support this causal connection. From a budgetary standpoint, qualitative improvements across the board actually precipitated a decline in constant dollars (as well as a percentage of GNP) in the US strategic defense budget between the years 1961 to 1967. More critically, despite US unwillingness to move forward with the ABM, the Soviets continued research “at a pace not significantly reduced from that which existed prior to the ABM treaty.” And this despite the “oracular confidence” (Wohlstetter) by opponents of the ABM that the Soviets knew “that to succeed they must inhibit ballistic missile defense” - an “insight acquired from the Americans.”

132Facts and figures are Wohlstetter’s. See Wohlstetter, “Strength, Interest and New Technologies,” 6, 7.

133Report of Team “B”, 34. The internal quote is from a classified NIE report from the early 1970s.

134Newhouse, Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT, 3
The third and more serious argument contra-ABM was the contention that defenses might increase the risk of war because, though ballistic missile defense might be ineffective as a purely defensive system, if combined with first-strike weaponry it could prove frighteningly robust to an adversary. The reason, assuming a first-strike is capable of significantly reducing the nuclear arsenal of one’s adversary, is that the remaining nuclear weapons of one’s adversary may be successfully defended against by an even partially effective ballistic missile system. An ABM system may never be 100% effective, but if the damage from a nuclear war could be limited to millions of casualties (as opposed to the tens or hundred’s of millions under normal, non-ABM conditions) the appeal of a first-strike may be too great to resist. It is in this manner that the logic of preemption might again become operative. If one’s adversary were unable to securely rely on their second-strike capability, they may logically be compelled to launch a first strike. It is in accordance with this type of counterintuitive logic that defense (or first-strike weapons in this case) was understood as bad and offense (or second-strike weapons in this case) as good.

For Wohlstetter and his students, this logic is so contorted that it fails to understand what is obvious to common sense. As one of his protégés, Leon Sloss, asked: “Can anyone doubt that if the consequences would be severe, whether one goes first or second, deterrence is likely to prevail, at least so long as decision makers are even minimally rational?”135 This implies, of course, that those who argue ballistic missile defense does not work are correct, at least insofar as a massive nuclear attack is concerned. But there are other limited attacks against which a properly defined ballistic missile system might be effective. Moreover, the effects of even a limited role to ABM would have the salutary

benefit of reducing “the effect of desperate threats, and so decreases the cost and increases
the worth of commitments to third countries.”  

Ultimately, opposition to the deployment of ABM and, in later years, to SDI, boiled
down to the importance that most theorists and government officials like Brodie, Schelling
and McNamara “attach(ed) to ensuring mutual destruction of the United States as well as the
Soviet Union in the event of any use of nuclear weapons.” The doctrine of mutual assured
destruction operated on the premise that international stability was a consequence of the
United States’ and Soviet Union’s ability to destroy one another and to remain, themselves,
always vulnerable to destruction. “A defense of the United States would get in the way,”
Wohlstetter observed.  

The real problem with proponents of MAD was that they only got half the theory
regarding second-strike capability correct: the part dealing with the necessity of ensuring the
survival of a nuclear capability following a Soviet attack is adopted but “the part of the
theory that stressed the necessity for having a force that responsible political and military
leaders would actually be willing to use in answering an attack” was ignored: “The risk to the
Soviets is the product of two factors: the amount of harm the United States is capable of
doing, and the probability that the nation would use that capability to do harm. McNamara
ignored the probability component.”  If the likelihood that the United States would
respond to various scenarios involving a Soviet attack - on Europe or on the United States,

defense...can also help stabilize arms control arrangements against small non-signers or violators of the arrangements” and
enhance the goal of non-proliferation.”


138Ibid., 10.
massive or limited - can be said to approach zero because, as Brodie himself pointed out years earlier, to do so would be the equivalent of national suicide, then this “tended to erode the credibility of any U.S. response and so to undermine the ability of the United States to deter any Soviet attack on an ally; or any attack at all confined enough to leave the United States the prospect of survival if it did not respond.”\footnote{Ibid., 11. Wohlstetter’s criticism is not limited only to MAD but also includes MAD-inspired theories of extended deterrence as well. The basic aims of the policy of extended deterrence was to deter aggression not only against the US homeland but also against its allies. Wohlstetter clearly supported this aim. Where strategists like Wohlstetter and Brodie and Schelling, as well as successive US administrations, differ is how best to achieve this aim. Many advocates of extended deterrence draw on Schelling’s theory of manipulation of risk in order to set in place a slippery slope policy that would empower local US commanders in Europe to respond to any Soviet attack with tactical nuclear weapons. The reason for this approach was to effectively achieve deterrence without threatening all-out nuclear retaliation – which, many agreed, was not credible - but, rather, by relying on the massive risks associated with nuclear combat. But, precisely because of the massive risks associated with nuclear combat, Wohlstetter did not believe this form of MAD-inspired extended deterrence to be any more credible. Rather, he stressed the need to meet aggression discriminatorily at its own level.}

**Game Theory and the Assault on Common Sense**

The intellectual foundation for the doctrine of assured destruction originates in game theory and bargaining strategy models that were a function of the training that several key theorists received as economists. From Thomas Schelling and Charles Hitch at the RAND Corporation in the 1950s to Kenneth Waltz in the 1970s, economists have had a far-reaching impact on the field of strategic studies and international relations and so too have their models and modes of analysis. Wohlstetter and his students were always somewhat contemptuous of these models and modes of analysis, brushing them aside as lacking in seriousness.\footnote{Wohlstetter, “Theory and Opposed-Systems Design,” 306. In this 1967 article, in which he sketched his preferred approach of “opposed-systems design” for strategic studies, he wrote dismissively “that games and game theory have played a much smaller role in serious studies whose main aim is to aid specific decisions on opposed systems” than in, say, “general academic behavioral literature.” Italics mine.} They persisted in the view that the delicate balance of power between the superpowers was at once too complex and too intuitive, not to say simple, for game theory...
and bargaining studies to be of much use. The complexities have to do with the kind of
detailed empirical work advocated by Wohlstetter and reviewed earlier; the intuitive aspect to
strategic studies required the theorist to focus the bulk of his or her efforts and policy
proposals on plausible real world scenarios. But for game theorists like Herman Kahn,
“probability” and “preference” are interchangeable and logically lead to the same
counterintuitive conclusions. This is because all decisions are committee-based (e.g.
“formed of the people of the United States”) and “there seems to be no way in principle
(and very often in practice) to make this committee act reasonably.” Committees may not
act reasonably because what may seem probable to an individual may not, by way of the
algebraic calculations of game theory, be what the committee defines as probable.141

This poses an enormous challenge for strategic studies because the temptation is for
the theorist to listen to his or her intuition about what is probable and to plan accordingly.
But for Kahn and other game theorists, in the nuclear age one must be prepared to
“consider seriously ideas which seem to be ‘crack-pot’ or unrealistic” or risk being left
behind:

This means that the military planner who refuses to accept rapidly the
unconventional implications of eagerly accepted unconventional gadgets is often one
or two revolutions behind the current technology. He has to be one or two revolutions ahead if he is to do successful planning. The only way for him to do this
is to put time, energy, and thought into exploring unfamiliar and often, to the
individual concerned, unpleasant or distasteful ideas.142

141Herman Kahn, On Thermonuclear War (Princeton: Princeton University, 1961), 121.
142Ibid., 125.
The foundation for these “distasteful” and “crack-pot” ideas to which Kahn refers was the doctrine of assured destruction, a doctrine that by the mid-1960s became widely accepted by experts in numerous fields including eminent scientists and physicists. Reliance on the counterintuitive logic of MAD by many of these experts led to the denigration of the common sense approach of dealing first with what is most probable. For Wohlstetter, the confidence of these experts was misplaced as “experts are seldom ‘expert beyond experience,’” and though “analysis is needed” it is not needed “to replace intuition, but to sharpen it and supplement it.”

It is within this context that Wohlstetter found a great deal of the academic literature on deterrence to contain far too many “artificialities” and “absurdities” to be of use in understanding how deterrence worked in the real world. Its “key defect” was its reliance on a “conception of stability” that “can not be captured in the binary relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union nor even by a set of pair-wise stable deterrent relations among the five nuclear powers.” Singling out Hermann Kahn’s analytical pairing of “Country A” and “Country B” together with “Type 1” and “Type 2” deterrents for particularly harsh criticism, Wohlstetter concludes that these games “bear almost no relation to the main plausible circumstances” in which either side to a conflict might actually use nuclear weapons. These analytical games are, rather, a function of the “automaticity” (Brodie) of an assumed retaliatory response. The assumed response is sensible only according to models that describe the behavior of actors in “peacetime” (Kahn), or “before

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145 Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, 126. See the section “Peacetime Objectives of a Strategic Force” where Kahn outlines his three kinds of deterrence.
hostilities” (Brodie), that is, not in the harsh reality of a nuclear war. As Kahn himself acknowledged (and Wohlstetter highlighted in his critique), in the real world, “U.S. leaders ‘might be deterred from attacking the Soviet heartland even to avenge a Soviet attack on Europe.’ As well they might,” Wohlstetter concludes, “if it means the United States too would be attacked.”

A more plausible scenario to consider for Wohlstetter consisted of a Soviet invasion of Europe coupled with the tactical use of nuclear weapons. To confront this real world scenario, the United Stated had to be armed with an actionable strategic defense but game theory and its counterintuitive logic led in a wholly different and dangerous direction:

The suicidal rhetoric of MAD encouraged…the U.S. government to strip itself of defenses and to neglect powerful trends in the technologies of sensing, information, and control that have increasingly made feasible both active defense and a selective and discriminating offense. Even more it encouraged Western leaders to ignore the significance of the fact that the Soviets were vastly increasing their power to make a Western unrestrained response to a Soviet selective attack an unthinkable disaster for the West; and that, at the same time, the Soviets were building a capability to execute attacks that might achieve important political objectives and yet fall short of causing the apocalypse. It would remain to the United States to bring on the apocalypse – or surrender.

Wohlstetter remained steadfast in his belief that the best deterrence consisted of a relentless pursuit of so-called offensive and defensive weapons systems and this, in turn, required a heavy reliance on the incorporation of new technologies. New technologies allowed the military “to do new things” and “to do the old things more cheaply and better,” with greater

146Ibid., 31. Internal quote is by Herman Kahn in On Thermonuclear War. Page number for quote is omitted by Wohlstetter.

147Ibid., 32.
efficiency, accuracy and within peacetime budgetary constraints.\textsuperscript{148} To those like Brodie who were willing to renounce promising new technologies like the cruise missile\textsuperscript{149} in the pursuit of arms control agreements that promised “a salutary rigidity”\textsuperscript{150} in the relations of the superpowers, Wohlstetter was adamant: “there is no rest.”\textsuperscript{151} That is, there is no rest from the pursuit of all reasonable options. It is an admonition he made throughout his career beginning with the balance of terror article and culminating in a series of articles in the journal \textit{Foreign Policy} in the early 1970s which served as the impetus to the Team “B” report of a few years later.\textsuperscript{152}

\textbf{Wohlstetter, Deterrence and the Neoconservatives}

What, then, does an effective US nuclear deterrent look like for Wohlstetter? And what effect finally did Wohlstetter’s approach have on the neoconservatives?

For Wohlstetter, an effective nuclear deterrent would not be too dissimilar to the policy of flexible response adopted by the Kennedy Administration in its first two years coupled with a zealous pursuit of limiting the proliferation of nuclear weapons to as few states as possible. It would rely on the twin pillars of reducing the vulnerability of US forces and pursuing the most technologically advanced weapons systems. It would avoid

\begin{footnotes}
\item Brodie, “On the Objectives of Arms Control.” See page 33 where he writes that “the fate of ourselves and the world is not going to hang on what we do or fail to do about some object like the cruise missile.”
\item Brodie, “The Development of Nuclear Strategy,” 82.
\item See Albert Wohlstetter, “Is There a Strategic Arms Race?” and “Optimal Ways To Confuse Ourselves.”
\end{footnotes}
handicapping the pursuit of these objectives by way of arms control agreements that sought to place arbitrary qualitative and quantitative limits on weapons systems. Instead, Wohlstetter would seek a defensive posture for the United States that would meet aggression discriminately at its own level, whether this required the use of conventional or nuclear weapons.

Wohlstetter, of course, did not oppose all efforts to reduce the actual number of nuclear weapons so long as such quantitative reductions came by way of qualitative improvements in precision and force protection. Wohlstetter’s preferred approach would not be insensitive to diplomatic efforts aimed at moderating tensions between the superpowers, but effective diplomacy would require clarity of purpose and message. Diplomacy would also proceed from the premise that the nature of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was political, not technological. Underlying this approach is the belief that theory and intuition served a common purpose, with the former a supplement to the latter, and that “the danger presented by strategic nuclear weapons, grave though it may be, does not call for a qualitative departure from the norms of traditional military thinking.”

Returning, once more, to the six paired debates that distinguished Wohlstetter’s approach to strategic studies from other prominent theorists in the field - from the premise that the balance of terror is indeed delicate to the suspicion that the Soviets were aggressively pursuing a strategy of victory in war in contrast to the US reliance on MAD - we find

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153 In fact, one of the more noteworthy consequences of Wohlstetter’s basing study in the 1950s was that by getting SAC to reduce the vulnerability of its strategic forces, it eliminated the alternate course of action which would have included a massive increase in the number of nuclear weapons.

154 The Report of Team “B,” 10. This comment was in reference to the Soviets who, in the Report’s opinion, had not altered their thinking as had their American counterparts.
evidence of Wohlstetter’s thought in the writings and political efforts of his students and protégés and many neoconservatives. Wohlstetter’s critique of MAD and the orthodoxy of arms control of the late 1960s and 1970s were frequently cited as source material in many of the harshest neoconservative critiques of détente and SALT 1 and substantiated their larger efforts to change how Soviet motives and power were perceived by US intelligence services and by the intellectual classes generally.  

It was in these efforts that Wohlstetter and some of his students found common ground with Senator Jackson and the then nascent group of neoconservatives whose principal figures in the realm of foreign policy at the time were Norman Podhoretz, Patrick Moynihan, Theodore Draper, Richard Pearle and Paul Wolfowitz. In the words of Norman Podhoretz, Sen. Jackson’s office represented a “halfway house” of sorts from the moment of their alienation from the Democratic Party to their ultimate embrace of the party of Ronald Reagan:

Jackson was appealing because he represented the halfway house to which we retreated, moving away from the Left. Scoop not only was the guy who was right about foreign policy. We also looked on him as a potential savior of the Democratic Party.  

Along the way, there were efforts to reconstitute the Democratic Party by incorporating the thrust of Team “B’s” findings and the larger critique of détente into a reconstituted form of

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Cold-War liberalism. A direct outgrowth of these efforts was the formation in the mid-1970s of the Committee for a Democratic Majority (CDM) and the Committee for the Present Danger (CPD), groups governed by several elder statesmen of the Democratic Party, future neoconservatives and members of Team “B.” Norman Podhoretz and Paul Wolfowitz were both members of the CPD and, together with Richard Pipes, they sounded the alarm regarding the “extraordinary surge” (Kissinger) in the size of Soviet strategic forces and adventurism while the United States pursued unilateral measures to reduce its nuclear deterrent and retreat into a policy of neoisolationism. Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Pearle co-authored, with Sen. Jackson’s approval, a twenty-three page memo on SALT II for the newly elected President Carter in which they highlighted the failure of the Nixon-Kissinger-Ford approach to recognize the “obvious truth…that not all negotiable agreements are in our interest; that some agreements may be worse than none.” Known as the Jackson Memorandum, it called for keeping the cruise missile and the B-1 bomber, among other weapons systems, as well as the elimination of the Soviet advantage in heavy missiles that SALT I had codified.

The Jackson memorandum received only a partial hearing by the Carter administration and, ultimately, its principal demands were ignored. The Committee for the Present Danger was vehement in its opposition to Carter’s formal proposals for SALT II in May of 1977, concluding that “Carter was McGovernism without McGovern.” By the

157The chairman of Team “B,” Richard Pipes, was a member of the CPD. So too were Norman Podhoretz and Paul Wolfowitz. Podhoretz, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Daniel Moynihan were members of the CDM. Eugene Rostow was the chairman of the CPD and a member of the defense task force of the CDM. See Friedman, p. 143.


159Kaufman, 361. The Wolfowitz connection to this memo is found in Friedman, 145.

end of the 1970s, neoconservative disillusionment with the Democratic Party was complete and the intellectual foundation and independence of neoconservatism firmly established. Neoconservatism in the 1980s demonstrated the continued relevance of Wohlstetter’s thought, specifically, in their appeal for “unilateral American actions,” like the deployment of the MX missile and resurrection of ABM funding in the form of SDI. The emphasis was one of victory in the political, moral and military conflict with the Soviet Union. These policy recommendations reignited the ABM controversy, the logic of MAD, and the fear that such policies would trigger the action-reaction phenomenon presumed by critics to be inherent to the development of new weapons systems. A key difference between the 1970s and 1980s was that those responsible for providing the intellectual foundation for such policies no longer included Cold-War liberals in the Democratic Party. Rather, it was their reconstituted brethren, the neoconservatives, together with a disproportionate number from the ranks of The Committee for the Present Danger, who, as officials in the Reagan Administration or in the role of public intellectuals, gave added heft to Reagan’s policies and


defended them from the scathing criticisms of the “bien-pensants” of the foreign policy and intellectual elite.  

From this newly acquired position of influence, neoconservatives provided intellectual cover for the US government to move toward a nuclear policy of flexible response with the Soviet Union. For neoconservatives, the moral worth of this more disciplined and flexible approach owed its strength to the strategic teachings of Albert Wohlstetter. Combined with their hardened views of Soviet motives, neoconservatives inside and out of the Reagan administration put forth a comprehensive agenda for arresting the expansionary policies of the Soviet Union with an eye toward rolling back Soviet gains achieved over the course of the three previous US administrations.

Despite having been brought within the fold of established political power after years of political exile, neoconservatives outside the administration - specifically Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, Walter Laquer and Robert Tucker - proved impatient with the pace of change. Norman Podhoretz, for instance, went from ebullient in 1981 to downright despondent by 1983 after the Reagan administration failed to suspend trade and economic relations with the Warsaw Pact. Demonstrating, arguably, a bit of political naïveté regarding the magnitude of change possible in such a short time, Podhoretz wrote that though “it would be hard to think of a more consistent and forceful critic of détente than Mr. Reagan…it is equally hard to think of a term that more accurately describes his own foreign
policy.” By 1984, Podhoretz was resigned to the fact that Reagan was “more politician than ideologue.”

These criticisms were not uniformly accepted by all neoconservatives and strained the relationships between Kristol and Podhoretz, on the one hand, and others like Jeane Kirkpatrick (Reagan’s ambassador to the United Nations) and Theodore Draper. The criticisms of Reagan also opened up neoconservatives to the charge of being unrealistic and strident, concerned more with the rightness of their arguments than the hard job of effecting incremental change through the political process. These charges – of inflexibility, stridency and abstractness – would surface again over twenty years later during the buildup to the war in Iraq and its aftermath.

CHAPTER 2

KISSINGER, DÉTENTE AND THE MORAL AND POLITICAL AMBITION OF NEOCONSERVATISM

In an unscripted moment at the end of the Moscow summit in 1974, following months of repeated criticism by Sen. Jackson and by members of his own party, Henry Kissinger gave voice to a truism that, depending one’s view, was either refreshingly frank or terribly shortsighted: “What in the name of God is strategic superiority? What is the significance of it…at these numbers? What do you do with it?”\(^1\) The fact that the absolute number of nuclear weapons comprising the arsenals of the United States and Soviet Union were sufficient to destroy the world many times over was not lost on anyone. This was evident throughout the debate between Wohlstetter, Brodie and Schelling. It was also plainly evident to Henry Kissinger. But whereas the other theorists came down squarely on either side of the debate involving the explanatory power of MAD and the utility of arms control, Kissinger was frequently perceived to be of two minds. While sensitive to the shortcomings of MAD as a framework for dealing with the dynamics of an actual shooting war, he was quite comfortable - maddeningly so to his critics - in negotiating quantitative limits to US nuclear weapon systems as part of his larger effort, first as National Security

\(^1\)Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 119.
Advisor and then as Secretary of State under Presidents Nixon and Ford, to achieve a workable balance of power with the Soviet Union. If this meant sacrificing or delaying the development or implementation of a particular weapons system, the first question to be asked was, how did such a concession fit within the larger policy of détente and Kissinger’s concept of establishing “linkages” with the Soviet Union?

It is the larger policy of détente, of which arms control was a key component, that defined Kissinger’s time in public office. But détente also came to define its opponents, in particular, the neoconservatives. For Kissinger and Nixon, détente was the intellectual framework that gave form to a new balance of power with the Soviet Union, one that reflected the changing dynamics of the international order as well as the US failure in Vietnam and the domestic convulsions to which it gave rise; for neoconservatives, détente represented a moral and political failure in both its ambition and effect as it not only attempted to “negotiate the non-negotiable”\(^\text{168}\) (Podhoretz) with the Soviet Union but moved toward its goal in a clumsy and, often, deceptive fashion. Neoconservatives, Sen. Jackson and Albert Wohlstetter, repeatedly attacked the moral, political and strategic assumptions supporting détente - a critique that Kissinger has spent the years since leaving public office responding to.

I argue that the neoconservative critique of détente is relevant to this study because it reveals, in the form of a concrete policy battle, the scope of the moral and political ambition of neoconservatism. Neoconservatives criticized détente as being too abstract in its design and incompatible with the democratic process. Its emphasis on bargaining with the enemy, furthermore, jeopardized the moral and political resolve of the American people in their

\(^{168}\text{Jeffers, The Norman Podhoretz Reader, 208.}\)
fight against communism. It is in this critique of détente by men like Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol and Theodore Draper that neoconservatives develop their meaning of politics and morality for the first time. I argue that these moral and political differences, when contrasted with the relativism and historicism of Kissinger’s political thought, point us toward the larger philosophical and epistemological questions that distinguish neoconservatism from contemporary international relations theory and the foreign policy establishment.

**Détente and The Quest for a New Balance of Power**

Kissinger attained celebrity status as the globe-trotting architect of a policy aimed at arresting a precipitous slide in American power abroad and stabilizing its relationship with the Soviet Union. His most passionate defense of the policy of détente was made, while in office, in a statement to the Senate Foreign Relation Committee in October 1974\(^{169}\), and, again, in the second installment of his trilogy dealing with his years in office, *Years of Upheaval*. These texts, along with the joint statement of “Basic Principles” by the United States and the Soviet Union of June, 1972, speak to the scope of détente’s ambition.\(^{170}\)

In reflecting on his time in office, Kissinger defended détente first on the basis of what it was not. He was convinced upon entering office that a third way to American foreign policy was imperative, one which eschewed “rhetorical crusades” and “escapist

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\(^{169}\) Statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Department of State Bulletin*, October 14, 1974.

isolationism.” In their place, the United States needed a policy that grasped the elemental realities of the then current dynamic of superpower relations. It was one predicated on the twin pillars of “deterrence and coexistence” with an enemy that, all too frequently, was viewed by many in the foreign policy community as implacable and unworthy of engagement. In Kissinger’s view, a confluence of events in the late 1960s and 1970s cried out for the supple skill and “mature leadership” of a statesman who took “seriously the world balance of power, for if it tilted against (the United States),” Kissinger warned, “it might prove irreversible.”

The dominant liberal and conservative foreign policy traditions were impotent with regards to the task at hand, according to Kissinger. The liberal tradition “treated foreign policy as a subdivision of psychiatry,” equating international relations with “human relations” and emphasizing “virtues of trust and unilateral gestures of good will.” By contrast, the conservative tradition considered foreign policy “an aspect of theology” with the understanding that it represented an “eternal struggle between good and evil” with “no middle ground and could end only with victory.” These traditions, for too long, rested on the “mindless reiteration of truculent slogans” regarding Soviet motives and had, with the passage of time, become stale and brittle. The genesis for these polarized traditions was found in the manner in which Americans thought about the world: “Malice is to be combated by force, or at least isolation; misunderstanding is to be removed by the strenuous exercise of good will.” And yet it was precisely the flexibility that Americans so critically lacked which was a hallmark of Soviet foreign policy. The Soviets viewed the world in


shades of gray, a nuanced perspective “heavily influenced by the Soviet conception of the balance of forces.”\textsuperscript{173}

For years the United States relied on the architectonic policy of containment in dealing with the Soviet Union but, for Kissinger, this policy had outlived its usefulness as it lacked “the staying power for a long struggle.”\textsuperscript{174} At any rate, the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union had irreversibly changed by the late 1960s. In his October 1974 statement to Congress, Kissinger listed six pivotal events that US policymakers needed to recognize as having created a new conceptual framework: the fragmentation in the Communist world; near nuclear parity between the superpowers; the economic problems of the Soviet Union; evidence that the Soviet Union itself sought a relaxation of tensions; the fragmentation among old allies; and the proliferation of new states across the globe.\textsuperscript{175} In \textit{The White House Years}, in a section dealing with his impressions as he first joined the Nixon Administration, Kissinger went even further, arguing that the transformative events facing the United States were structural in character, and that the war in Vietnam was only a symptom of the “painful adjustment” required by the United States as it came to terms with the limits of its own power - a world in which liberal internationalism was stretched beyond its means of conceptual integrity.\textsuperscript{176}

Other commentators at the time also highlighted important structural changes to the global order of the early 1970s that meant that a more cooperative approach with the Soviet

\textsuperscript{173}\textit{Department of State Bulletin}, October 14, 1974, 506.

\textsuperscript{174}Kissinger, \textit{Years of Upheaval}, 238.

\textsuperscript{175}\textit{Department of State Bulletin}, October 14, 1974. Years later, Kissinger would add Watergate, a divided Congress and the anti-war movement. See Henry Kissinger, “Between the Old Left and the New Right.”

\textsuperscript{176}Henry Kissinger, \textit{The White House Years} (New York: Little Brown & Co, 1979), 57.
Union was possible. Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote in 1971 about an emerging “technetronic” era, “an age in which technology and electronics...are increasingly becoming the principal determinants of...the global outlook for society.” These structural changes in the global order filled Brzezinski with the hope that Soviet-American competition could be dampened with the Soviet Union embracing the new era because of its “own felt need for increased collaboration in the technological and scientific revolution.” In this context, ideology might give way to a “global consciousness” based on increased trade, improved economic ties and knowledge transfers.177

Kissinger observed these same structural changes and saw an opportune moment for American foreign policy to seize the initiative.178 In lieu of containment, Kissinger promoted a quasi market-based approach to foreign policy, with talk of regulated and restrained competition where ideological differences “ultimately move from competition to cooperation.”179 Establishing this new marketplace for the competitive aspirations of both countries required adherence to the “so-called linkage concept.” The concept of linkages meant that the new marketplace would not be centered on a quid-pro-quo form of bartering, where exchanges between the superpowers are immediate and obvious to all observers. A more apt analogy is to that of a currency-based economy, where wealth can be accumulated and freely exchanged at a later date, and where a heightened level of abstraction necessitates a more nuanced understanding of value. In his lengthiest exposition of the “linkage” concept while in office, Kissinger explained:


178See Henry Kissinger, “Central Issues of American Foreign Policy,” in Kermit Gordon, ed., Agenda for the Nation (Washington: The Brookings Institute, 1968) where he writes that “we will never be able to contribute to building a stable and creative world order unless we first form some conception of it,” 614.

179Department of State Bulletin, October 14, 1974, 507.
Our approach proceeds from the conviction that, in moving forward across a wide spectrum of negotiations, progress in one area adds momentum to progress in other areas. If we succeed, then no agreement stands alone as an isolated accomplishment vulnerable to the next crises. We did not invent the interrelationship between issues expressed in the so-called linkage concept; it was a validity because of the range of problems and areas in which the interests of the United States and the Soviet Union impinge on each other. We have looked for progress in a series of agreements settling specific political issues, and we have sought to relate these to a new standard of international conduct appropriate to the dangers of the nuclear age. By acquiring a stake in this network of relationships with the West, the Soviet Union may become more conscious of what it would lose by a return to confrontation. Indeed, it is our hope that it will develop a self-interest in fostering the entire process of relaxation of tensions.\footnote{Department of State Bulletin, October 14, 1974, 508.}

While Kissinger projected a sober estimation of Soviet motives, acknowledging that the “Communist superpower did not wish us well,” he nonetheless adhered to a fairly optimistic vision of what the superpowers might accomplish through increased cooperation. Kissinger shared the vision of the Truman administration that a “more pluralistic” international order, “less susceptible to confrontation” and “more open to genuine cooperation,” was a legitimate aspiration. However, such august goals for international peace and cooperation were attainable only if the major powers agreed to “anchor their policies in the principles of moderation and restraint.”\footnote{Kissinger, \textit{Years of Upheaval}, 241; Ibid.} But what was it about the changing structural order that inspired in Kissinger the confidence that the Soviet Union was open to a “more pluralistic” international order? What signals were Kissinger, Nixon and Ford picking up that led them to believe that the Soviet Union would possibly adopt “principles of moderation” as the basis to their foreign policy and, ultimately, adhere to the rules of a linkage-based marketplace?

\footnote{Department of State Bulletin, October 14, 1974, 508.}
\footnote{Kissinger, \textit{Years of Upheaval}, 241; Ibid.}
Kissinger’s confidence that détente provided the means to moderate Soviet behavior was surprising given his acknowledged appreciation for the moral aspect of the Cold-War. In his own account, Marxism was well positioned to foster political unity in nascent countries the world over - countries that formed the basis for many of the structural changes to the global order brought about by containment - because it had an answer to the question of political legitimacy and authority. The answer depended on “harnessing resentments against Western cultural and political dominance” in an effort to divert attention away from the obvious failures of Soviet economic policies. In what Kissinger called “an historical joke, a materialist philosophy that has solved no country’s economic problems has spread because of its moral claims, while the West, professing an idealistic philosophy, has bemused itself with economic and technical remedies largely irrelevant to the underlying political and spiritual problem.”

Kissinger’s statement of the moral challenge of the Cold War is all the more surprising when contrasted with the major achievements of détente, which were almost without exception of an “economic and technical” quality. The major achievement of the Nixon Administration’s first term was, unquestionably, the SALT Agreement of May, 1972. From this followed the agreements on “Basic Principles” in June, 1972 and the Prevention of Nuclear War in 1973 which, in turn, were followed by several smaller, cooperative agreements ranging from most-favored-nations (MFN) treatment to energy conservation to, more symbolically, the joint training of Soviet-US astronauts for a planned rendezvous mission in space in 1975. But without question, for Kissinger, the priority was on negotiating effective arms control and economic trade agreements as the best means of

182Kissinger, The White House Years, 69.
responding to the technological reality of modern warfare and to ensnare the Soviet Union in a web of relationships, both economic and military, that promised a relaxation of tensions. As for the “underlying political and spiritual problem” facing the international order, and to which Marxism was so adept at exploiting, Kissinger remained largely silent. In fact, the “Basic Principles” of détente emphasized the need for “peaceful coexistence” predicated on the rejection by both countries of “any special rights in world affairs” or the pursuit of “marginal advantages,” with the “ultimate objective” of “complete disarmament…in accordance with the purposes and principles of the United Nations.”

Kissinger’s silence regarding the “political and spiritual problem” did not go unnoticed by neoconservatives, nor did his disavowal of US exceptionalism in favor of a kind of international morality regulated by a market-based system of cooperation with the Soviet Union.

**Arms Control and Trade**

The most tangible agreements negotiated and signed under détente related to matters of arms control and economic trade with the Soviet Union. Governed by the twin objectives of reducing the threat of nuclear war and transforming a competitive relationship into a more cooperative one, these agreements represented the linkages upon which détente hinged. On the matter of arms control, Kissinger demonstrated a level of sophistication with both sides of the MAD debate examined in Chapter 1. Kissinger was sensitive to the limitations of MAD theory, calling it “morally questionable” even in previous eras when the United States maintained a clear nuclear superiority; “in an age of approaching strategic

equality,” however, “it threatened to turn into a formula for either suicide or surrender.”

Reliance on such a logically dubious policy encouraged “reckless diplomacy,” according to Kissinger, because it forced the United States to deter a Soviet threat on the basis of a deterrent posture that could not reasonably be taken seriously. The insight that Kissinger believed he understood better than most was that the situation was fundamentally altered as a result of Soviet strategic parity; the usual emphasis on future Soviet strategic advantage being beside the point. By the early 1970s the moment of strategic parity had arrived. But whereas Wohlstetter understood the logical fallacy of MAD to mean that sound US policy required the introduction of advanced weapon systems so as to make more credible the threat of a retaliatory response against a Soviet first strike, Kissinger’s understanding was less obvious. While Kissinger could share in the optimism of MAD - commenting, for example, that since “both sides possess such enormous power, small additional increments cannot be translated into tangible advantage or even usable strength” - he tended to justify arms control on a narrower, more tactical basis.

The political climate that greeted the Nixon Administration “prevented a rethinking of old verities” regarding US strategic defense, according to Kissinger. New weapon systems were “decried as excessive,” “wasteful and dangerous” by an emboldened Congress at a moment of growing weakness for the Executive. It was all the Nixon Administration could do to maintain existing weapon systems. The first SALT, then, which stipulated quantitative restrictions to US and Soviet strategic forces, was not a function of “clever Soviet

184Kissinger, Years of Upheaval, 256.

negotiators” outmaneuvering their US counterparts. Rather, the Agreement reflected the conditions the United States had imposed on itself in the preceding years. Under such conditions, the Nixon Administration sought to leverage the debate on SALT in an effort to reach a national consensus regarding the defense posture of the United States and “to renew its request for a supplementary appropriation to strengthen (US) strategic forces – the B-1 strategic bomber; the Trident submarine and missile; cruise missiles; and more accurate missile warheads.”

Kissinger described SALT as a tactical retreat but one, he acknowledged, that was not without consequence – a consequence, one might add, that followed directly from his larger ambition:

Indeed, many new programs could be put through the Congress less on the merits than as bargaining chips. They were needed, various Administration spokesmen – including me – argued, so that they could be traded in negotiation. Whatever the tactical utility of this argument, it tended to reduce the energy with which new programs were pursued. The Pentagon found it difficult to muster enthusiasm – or scarce resources – for projects that were defined as negotiable.

The larger ambition of SALT was to negotiate away those very weapon systems on which the Pentagon had expended precious political capital in battle with an emboldened, often hostile, Congress. While this negotiating stance may seem untenable, Kissinger was reluctant to alter it meaningfully because, in his opinion, domestic support depended on the Administration’s embrace of arms control. In any case, agreeing to what were already self-

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186In 1966, the US decided to build no more nuclear weapons and to limit itself to improvement of existing weapons. This fact comes from the testimony of Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Rush, Department of State Bulletin, April 23, 1973, 479. Cited in Theodore Draper, “Détente,” 28.

187Kissinger, Years of Upheaval, 260, 261.
imposed quantitative limits allowed the United States to catch its political breath, focus on
developing a longer-term defense posture, and benefit from increased engagement with the
Soviet Union and the attendant re-conceptualization of the balance of power that logically
followed.188

The Neoconservative critique of détente

For neoconservatives like Theodore Draper, who authored one of the most
penetrating critiques of détente at the time, the contradictions were so numerous that the
entire enterprise made for bad policy. 189 Draper and other neoconservatives proffered four
strategic criticisms of détente. Their first criticism addressed Kissinger’s pursuit of a
comprehensive arms control agreement with the Soviet Union. Draper’s criticism was along
the lines of Wohlstetter’s argument against MAD theory and its intellectual support for arms
control. Kissinger, however, as noted above, rejected MAD theory for strategic and moral
reasons and yet nonetheless remained a leading advocate for arms control. For
neoconservatives, Kissinger’s rejection of MAD was simply replaced with a policy of détente
that sought to remove the risk of nuclear war by engagement with the Soviet Union. As
Kissinger put it in 1973, “détente is imperative” because “in a world shadowed by the danger
of nuclear holocaust, there is no rational alternative to the pursuit of relaxation of
tensions.”190 The expectation was that by fostering an entangled web of relationships with

188Kissinger called the quantitative limits imposed under SALT 1 “theoretical” for the United States, whereas the
Soviet Union had to “dismantle 210 ICBMs.” “In short,” Kissinger writes, “there was an imbalance, SALT did not create
it.” See Ibid., 256, 257.

189Theodore Draper, “Détente.”
the Soviet Union the risk of nuclear war would dissipate even though Kissinger acknowledged an increased risk for conventional war as a likely result.191 And yet, according to Draper, the “Basic Principles” of détente did not prepare the United States for conventional warfare. To the contrary, the “Basic Principles” encouraged a relaxing of tensions across the US military posture in accordance with foregoing those “marginal advantages” noted above. But events like the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 showed this approach to be poorly conceived as it was precisely those “marginal advantages” of a political, geographic and military character that the Soviet Union desperately sought. This eventuality, Draper argued, was not only consistent with Soviet historical behavior, and therefore should have been known in advance, it was also predicted by Wohlstetter as a logical consequence to the development of the types of precision-guided weapon systems that made conventional forces more attractive to both sides.192

Given these logical and empirical inconsistencies, as well as the long history of Soviet deception, neoconservatives were skeptical of the wisdom of détente from the outset. In this, their skepticism was similar to that of Kissinger the scholar, namely, that détente was an “illusion” and that in every recorded instance since 1917 it came to an end as soon as “an opportunity for expanding communism presented itself” to the Soviets.193 This insight informed the second strategic criticism by neoconservatives. Kissinger, in his 1957 in his

190Quote is from Kissinger’s speech to the Pilgrims of Great Britain, Department of State Bulletin, December 31, 1973, 779 found in G. Warren Nutter, Kissinger’s Grand Design, 11.

191Kissinger the scholar and Kissinger the diplomat were consistent in their appeal for larger US conventional forces. This makes the following charges by the neoconservatives, in some ways, all the more damning.


book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, dismissed the concept of “peaceful coexistence” (the name for détente at the time) as nothing more than “the most effective (Soviet) tactic” and “the best means to subvert the existing structure by means other than all-out war.” In other words, classic Leninist doctrine. The various détentes of their era - the mini-détente of the Kennedy Administration, the Franco-Soviet détente of 1965 - all followed a similar path from euphoria to disappointment. In 1968, just before joining the Nixon Administration, Kissinger wrote:

> Each (détente) was hailed in the West as ushering in a new era of reconciliation and as signifying the long-awaited final change in Soviet purposes. Each ended abruptly with a new period of intransigence, which was generally ascribed to a victory of Soviet hardliners rather than to the dynamics of the system. There were undoubtedly many reasons for this. But the tendency of many in the West to be content with changes of Soviet tone and to confuse atmosphere with substance surely did not help matters.\(^{195}\)

The apparent metamorphosis of Kissinger’s thought was baffling to neoconservatives. They became convinced, in the face of routine Soviet violation of the agreement regarding “Basic Principles,” that détente and the concept of linkages was too abstract and unmoored from events to have any real meaning. Or, to assign it meaning, détente was no really different than the Cold War, a fact to which Kissinger admitted following the events of October 1973. In an interview, he commented that détente meant simply that “confrontations are kept

\(^{194}\)Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, 142-143.

within bounds that do not threaten civilized life.” 196 If this indeed were the case, détente was for neoconservatism, then, nothing more than “the Cold War pursued by other means - and sometimes by the same.” 197

A third criticism of détente focused on the logic of expanding trade with the Soviet Union when it was so clearly one-sided in the opinion of neoconservatives. The Soviet Union was the recipient of American technology and agriculture at a time of mounting economic failures for the Soviet economy. Once more, Kissinger, the scholar, and Nixon, prior to becoming President, had expressed skepticism regarding the wisdom of providing what they perceived as a handout to the enemy. “Why,” Nixon asked rhetorically in 1962, “should we pull them out of their trouble and make communism look better?” 198 But, once in office, the broad progress made on the political front necessitated for Kissinger and Nixon the opening of an equally broad policy of economic engagement. In response, Congressional critics, especially Sen. Jackson, pushed hard for a quid pro quo between increased trade and a more liberal emigration policy by the Soviets. Economic trade, Kissinger argued, could do only so much as a lever with the Soviet Union. That said, Kissinger remained optimistic that “over time, trade and investment may leaven the autarkic tendencies of the Soviet system, invite gradual association of the Soviet economy with the world economy, and foster a degree of interdependence that adds an element of stability to the political equation.”199

Kissinger’s optimism regarding trade with the Soviet Union struck Draper, Podhoretz, Sen. Jackson and other critics of détente as pure folly. Soviet intentions regarding trade were so transparent to neoconservatives that they wondered aloud as to where the skepticism of Kissinger the scholar had disappeared to. Moreover, they were at a loss to explain why Kissinger remained so opposed to thinking about economic trade in a quid pro quo manner when, say, internal Soviet affairs were not involved. But for Kissinger trade was “an act of policy” and “not primarily of commercial opportunity.” He meant by this that it was part of the larger political project of détente. But his comment carried another less favorable implication, as Draper pointed out. Without the hard currency to pay for the West’s agriculture and technology, or the ability to produce enough raw materials for export, the Soviet Union was forced to rely on the good graces of its trading partner. Trade was therefore not based on technical or economic factors; it was purely a political consideration. This meant, according to Robert Ellsworth, US representative to the NATO council in 1970, only one thing: “In essence such an agreement is not trade, but aid.” And aid to one’s enemy simply defied common sense for neoconservatives. It was yet another example of bad policy following from ambiguously defined strategy.

Lastly, neoconservatives were perplexed by the Nixon policy of Vietnamization and the Administration’s obsession with the vaguely defined concept of American honor. In their collective opinion, the continued prosecution of a war that had virtually no domestic

199 *Department of State Bulletin*, October 14, 1974, 510, 511.

200 Kissinger would frequently dismiss calls by critics for attaching political and economic progress with the Soviets to changes in their internal system of government (e.g. freedom of emigration, release of political prisoners) because he felt that this would lead to Soviet intransigence on other matters.

201 Draper, 32. Quote from Ellsworth comes from *Department of State Bulletin*, November 23, 1970, 642.

support and which, everyone agreed, was likely to end in defeat was nothing more than “nonsense” disguised as honor.\footnote{Glazer, “Vietnam: The Case for Immediate Withdrawal,” 6.} Placing such emphasis on the ceremony of peaceful settlement ignored the obvious in Vietnam for Glazer, Draper and Podhoretz. If 500,000 US troops and a considerable loss of blood and treasure could not defeat the Vietcong through 1968, how, he asked, could a poorly equipped South Vietnamese army with a Soviet Vietnamese government lacking legitimacy and meaningful domestic support contend by itself with both the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese?\footnote{Ibid. For proof that Kissinger also understood this fact see Henry Kissinger, “The Vietnam Negotiations,” \textit{Foreign Affairs} 47 (1969): 230, where he writes that US “military strength has no political corollary; we have been unable so far to create a political structure that could survive opposition from Hanoi after we withdraw.”} To ignore the experiences of the Johnson Administration was inexplicable; to think that it would make “a particle of difference” to others how the United States was forced to exit Vietnam was pure fantasy, and a costly one at that.\footnote{Draper, 27.}

But for Kissinger and Nixon, the policy of Vietnamization, together with rapprochement with China and détente with the Soviet Union, were from the outset the geopolitical objectives of the Administration. “Unilateral withdrawal” in Vietnam was the worse possible outcome for the United States, according to Kissinger. Nixon and Kissinger understood US honor as a kind of well to be drawn upon as it sought to execute its geopolitical vision of the world. In addition to driving a wedge between China and the Soviet Union, US credibility in Vietnam was essential if it sought to discourage Soviet adventurism abroad. “Ending the war honorably,” Kissinger wrote in 1969, “is essential for the peace of the world. Any other solution may unloose forces that would complicate
prospects of international order.” The conceptual problems that crippled the successful prosecution of the US war in Vietnam was to be replaced with an ambiguous concept of honor that would enhance US efforts at creating an equally ambiguously defined international order. This left neoconservatives scratching their heads in frustration, especially since Kissinger the scholar had acknowledged that US honor was easily compromised “if Hanoi proves intransigent and the war goes on.” For then the US must “seek to achieve as many of its objectives as unilaterally possible” which, in the absence of “a political structure that could survive opposition from Hanoi after we withdraw,” left no doubt to the outcome.

The Moral & Political Case Against Détente

For neoconservatives, détente was a strategic failure because it consisted of a series of unilateral concessions by the United States based on abstract gains - honor, political and economic interdependency, and the like. The fear among neoconservatives was that “the unilateral concessions yielding those gains will cause us to appear all the more weak-willed in the eyes of Soviet leaders, while the gains themselves increase Soviet power commensurately. Soviet leaders will consequently be tempted to seek even greater gains through power politics and to treat the United States as a weakling deserving contempt.”

207 Ibid., 233 and 230
208 G. Warren Nutter, Kissinger's Grand Design, 19. It is an open question whether Warren Nutter would have considered himself a neoconservative had he not passed away in 1979. The written record, apart from the similarity of his critique of détente to that of Draper’s and Podhoretz’s, does not indicate that he took a position. However, in an email exchange with his daughter, it is clear that he considered himself a classical liberal in the mold of neoconservatives and that he was dubious of conservatives, considering them too isolationist. He also held Norman Podhoretz in high regard.
This was not all. There was also the matter of the moral and political failure of détente to be considered. Similar to the earlier link between poor strategy and immorality in the pursuit of arms control, neoconservatives believed that because of its flawed strategy, détente too was immoral. Neoconservatives made three moral and political claims. First, they argued, détente led to confusion about the sacrifices necessary to win in a long conflict and thus weakened American resolve, leading to its own kind of isolationism; second, détente directed limited resources to the wrong problem - converting the Cold War relationship with the Soviets into a benign marketplace of cooperation - and left untried other policy options that may have more effectively undermined the Soviet Union (e.g. promotion of liberal elements in Eastern Europe, unifying Europe around a single policy); third, neoconservatives were persuaded that effective public policy in a democratic society like the United States was “obliged to be public policy, subject to public scrutiny, appraisal, and approbation.” The abstract nature of détente and the “mystery, secrecy, fait accomplis” of Kissingerian diplomacy were “simply out of place” in such a system of government.209

The most forceful of the three was the first, that détente led to the demoralization of the West and confusion surrounding the appropriate moral response to the threat posed by Soviet communism. For Podhoretz, Nixon and Kissinger failed to make a distinction in the character of states or regimes. While always careful to “make their obeisances to the role of ideology” as explanatory of Soviet behavior, “for the most part they saw the Soviet Union as a nation-state like any other, motivated by the same range of interests that define and shape the foreign policies of all nation-states.” In accordance with the realist school of thought to which both men subscribed, their inclination was to treat the Soviets as a “status-quo”

power. In this manner Communist Russia was no different than Czarist Russia, with history and geography accorded more weight than ideology as an explanatory factor in determining a state’s foreign policy.\footnote{Norman Podhoretz, “Kissinger Reconsidered,” in Jeffers, The Norman Podhoretz Reader, 205, 206.}

“But what if the Soviet Union is not a normal state,” Podhoretz asked? “What if in this case ideology overrides interest in the traditional sense?” Given the tactical acumen of the Soviets during previous periods of détente with the West, a fact about which Kissinger the scholar had repeatedly warned, why were Kissinger and Nixon so confident that, like Hitler before them, the Soviets were not simply making minor, tactical adjustments in their diplomacy with the United States while committed to the larger goal of the “worldwide triumph of socialism” (Team “B”)?

For Podhoretz, the Soviet Union was clearly not a normal state and its prime objective remained the creation of a socialist world. This meant that resolution of the conflict between the US system of government and economy and that of the Soviet’s was not possible by way of diplomacy. Flatly put, “given the nature of the Soviet threat, détente is not possible.” And yet by engaging the Soviets along the lines of the “basic principles” of détente, the US was led in the direction of strategic confusion and moral weakness. Strategically, it led to agreements like SALT I, which imposed unilateral limits on US strategic forces and economic “linkages” that constrained the American response (and “paralyzed” the Europeans) to Soviet aggression; morally, public opinion was “lulled by negotiated agreements,” which “result in disarming only the party that wants to disarm and not the party that has no intention of doing so.”\footnote{Ibid., 206, 207.} Such policies weakened American


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resolve. Weakness of character is a vice for neoconservatives and has the same effect on nations as it does on individuals: it makes sacrifice and commitment difficult. It results in a failure to discriminate between allies and enemies and it ends up with the predictable result of winning no enemies and losing many allies. Détente thus bred a new kind of isolationism that risked giving rise to the belief that “if we can persuade ourselves that we can solve our problems with our erstwhile enemies, why do we need to bother with allies?”

For Podhoretz and Draper, this was a very real problem and not only with regards to the Soviet Union. Their concerns also included US rapprochement with China. Détente in both instances represented a misreading of the national character of the American people and it carried with it ominous consequences.

By representing the Soviet Union as a competing superpower with whom we could negotiate peaceful and stable accommodations - instead of a Communist state hostile in its very nature and trying to extend its rule and its political culture over a wider and wider area of the world - the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations robbed the Soviet-American conflict of the moral and political dimensions for the sake of which sacrifices could be intelligently demanded by the government and willingly made by the people.

Weakened American resolve had a second deleterious moral and political consequence. Treating the Soviet Union as a status quo power led to an incremental foreign policy under Nixon that focused on (a) a relaxation of tensions and increased cooperation with Soviets to be followed by (b) greater independence of Communist states in Eastern Europe and, of course, China. Thus, “instead of making the world safe for democracy,” detente had the

212Draper, 45.
213Podhoretz in Jeffers, 208.
perverse effect of making the world “safe for Titoism.” In *Years of Upheaval*, Kissinger was fond of pointing out the limitations to American foreign policy during his time in office and persuasively argued his case that there was simply no alternative to détente. But, as some neoconservatives pointed out, Kissinger was guilty of attacking a “straw man when he stubbornly insists that Western foreign policy cannot transform the Soviet domestic structure” because no reasonable analyst expected anything so dramatic. The real challenge for the Nixon and Ford Administrations was to maintain a cohesive Western alliance as the principal vehicle for combating the spread of communism and strengthening the “liberal cause in the East.” But détente had the opposite effect by undermining the Atlantic Alliance:

> The exaggerated American preoccupation with Soviet exigencies resulted in a neglect of European susceptibilities and the universal hopes generated by détente lowered the Europeans’ concern about their security...Later, there was a chain reaction to the treating of allies as a nuisance and of enemies as friends...The fact remains that American policy instead of strengthening the Atlantic community had only deepened the already existing European malaise and contributed to the weakening of the Alliance.

A final moral and political criticism had to do with the very abstractness of détente, its dependence on Kissinger the person, and the opaqueness of the so-called “philosophical deepening” which, for Kissinger, was necessary for the achievement of an effective American foreign policy. These were major shortcomings for a democratic society which

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214 Ibid., 209.


216 Robert Conquest, “Détente: An Evaluation,” *Survey*, Spring-Summer, 1974, 26. This article was the work of several students of Soviet studies including prominent neoconservatives like Richard Pipes and Bernard Lewis.

relied on a level of transparency and openness in the decision-making process of its leaders. It also highlighted one of the more enduring oddities of Kissinger’s career. As a scholar, Kissinger was suspicious of the reliance on personalities - a special challenge, he often warned, in the American context. But it is as a statesman and diplomat, not as an intellectual, that he will always be remembered. The reliance of détente on Kissinger the statesman may be partially explained by the fact that he “was so good at diplomacy, so great a virtuoso in the negotiating arts, that he may well have come to imagine that he could negotiate anything.” It may be further explained by Kissinger’s understanding, as a scholar, of the creative force of the great diplomat in world history, a concept centered around a notion of legitimacy impenetrable to all but the fully initiated.

Kissinger as both a scholar and diplomat was always more impressed with movement and activity than with clear beginnings and defined ends. His conception of history was one of constant motion, neither progressive nor teleological, and this informed how he thought about the great powers and their diplomacy. There was a real fear in Kissinger that if the aim of foreign policy had a defined ending, it risked being overtaken by the flow of history. Foreign policy, he once said, “knows no plateaus. What does not become a point of departure for a new advance soon turns into stagnation and then into retreat.” Elsewhere he reiterated this need for constant motion: “The world - and we ourselves - are still in the

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218 See in particular Kissinger, *The Necessity of Choice* where he comments that the “temptation to conduct personal diplomacy derives from the notion of peace prevalent in the United States and Great Britain.” It stems from the belief that peace is a normal state of affairs and war is an aberration of the normal state, 181.

219 Podhoretz in Jeffers, 210, 211.
process of adjusting to the developments we have set in train (through détente). But we know where we are going. We are moving with history, and moving history ourselves.”

It was Kissinger’s inability or unwillingness to provide greater clarity regarding his belief in the role of history in foreign policy that appeared either deceitful - because he knew that the American people and the leaders of both parties disavowed such an approach - or a sign of conceptual confusion on his part, according to Draper, Podhoretz and other neoconservatives. As an objective worthy of national purpose, at any rate, Kissinger’s foreign policy lacked the moral clarity that was central to the Cold War. His emphasis as a scholar on the need for legitimacy in the international order, without staking legitimacy on a moral foundation, only further convinced his critics that Kissinger was incapable of making the moral or political distinctions required to sustain US leadership in the ideological battle with Soviet and Chinese communism.

However, with the unambiguous victory of the United States in the Cold War, moral purpose returned, *ex post facto*, to the policies Kissinger shepherded during the Nixon and Ford Administrations. Kissinger’s publication of *Years of Renewal*, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, reflected a moral confidence seemingly absent at the time. In it, Kissinger

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220 Peter W. Dickson, *Kissinger and the meaning of history*, 22. The first quote is from a speech by Kissinger called “Constancy and Change in American Foreign Policy,” on June 23, 1975; the second quote is from President Nixon’s third annual report to Congress drafted under Kissinger’s direction and entitled “U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970s – The Emerging Structure of Peace,” February 9, 1972, 215.

221 See Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822*, Sentry Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), where he writes that “Diplomacy in a classic sense, the ‘adjustment’ of differences through negotiations, is possible only in ‘legitimate’ international orders,” 2. The overriding fear for Kissinger was chaos in the international order. Legitimacy is not to be confused with justice but rather as the opposite of chaos. Legitimacy allows for the effective management of the international order by the great power because each power effectively has a stake in the stability it provides. Kissinger’s pursuit of a legitimate order was frustrated by the revolutionary character of the Soviet Union “because in revolutionary situations the contending systems are less concerned with the adjustment of differences than with the subversion of loyalties.” As a result, “diplomacy is replaced by either war or an arms race,” ibid, 3. Kissinger’s opinion of the Soviet Union as a revolutionary power remained unchanged throughout his career as a scholar and diplomat. The connective tissue between these two seemingly contradictory beliefs seems to be the imperative to avoid nuclear war.
took issue with the assault on his record by neoconservatives that détente was morally, politically and strategically bankrupt, or that it somehow underestimated the political threat posed by the Soviet Union. “Far from conducting détente from a perception of weakness,” Kissinger wrote, its “flexible diplomacy” permitted the United States to outmaneuver the Soviets and “deprived them of their ideological card.” Détente forced the Soviets to face the reality of a “creaky economy, aging leadership” and “a dearth of true allies” which unmasked the USSR as “simply another power player and not a very effective one at that.”

As an example of the moral thrust of détente, Kissinger points to the Helsinki conference of 1975 when the US and its allies persuaded the Soviets to accept two principles that constituted the Helsinki Final Act: the principle of “peaceful change of borders” and the provisions for “the free movement of peoples” (so-called Basket III). Fifteen years later, “visionaries and courageous activists like Václav Havel and Lech Walesa turned these clauses of the Final Act into rallying cries for resisting totalitarianism in the Communist world and thereby ultimately brought about the liberation of Europe.” While not claiming to have predicted the result, Kissinger was unequivocal in his belief that Basket III and the principle of peaceful change were inserted “to exploit what we had come to recognize as the latent vulnerabilities of the Soviet empire.”

This description of events was astounding to his neoconservative critics. Robert Kagan accused Kissinger of making a “grand revisionist account of those last years in office.” More important than Kissinger’s revisionism, for Kagan, was that he went so far

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222 Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 101
223 Ibid., 638, 648.
as to suggest in *Years of Renewal* that “Reagan’s policy was, in fact, a canny reassertion of the geopolitical strategies of the Nixon and Ford Administrations clothed in the rhetoric of Wilsonianism.” This meant that Reagan’s policies “were little more than a ‘variant’ on Nixonian détente and Kissingerian realism, merely dressed up in ideological rhetoric.”

Kissinger’s failure to see the profound philosophical differences between détente and Reaganism was not only mistaken but exposed, once more, the moral and political confusion of his thought. Such confusion was evident in the Kissingerian narrative following the US victory in the Cold War. This narrative held that the policy of détente enshrined the “imperative of co-existence” while it simultaneously plotted the downfall of the Soviet Union; that it encouraged cooperation and peaceful competition while steadfast in its support for the ideological dimension of the conflict; that it was at once a means for the United States to catch its political breath at the “seeming nadir of America’s international position” and expose the structural shortcomings of communism.

**Neoconservatism and the Fight Against Moral and Political Relativism**

Détente could not be all things to all people at all times, according to the neoconservatives quoted above. This follows from the belief that ideas – strategic, political, philosophical and moral - have consequences. As put forth in the first chapter,

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224 Robert Kagan, “The Revisionist: How Henry Kissinger won the Cold War, or so he thinks,” *The New Republic*, June 21, 1999, 39. In defense of his charge of revisionism, Kagan highlights the fact that little if anything was said about the Helsinki Final Act in the first two volumes, *The White House Years* and *Years of Upheaval*, both of which were published shortly after Kissinger left office and, more importantly, prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

225 Ibid., 40.

226 Quotes are attributed to Kissinger in Kagan, 42, 38.
neoconservatives and their intellectual mentors, strategists like Albert Wohlstetter, have earned a reputation for the analytical rigor with which they expose the logical consequences of their opponent’s ideas and theories and the policies to which they lend support. Placed under critical scrutiny, theories like MAD and policies like détente have exhibited a fundamental incoherence in the core of their theses, so much so that their conceptual utility is impaired. During the turbulent politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s it was left to men like Podhoretz, Draper and Glazer, together with Sen. Jackson and his office, to vocally oppose these policies in the public sphere. The similarities in their style of argument, intellectual experience, and disillusionment with elements of both the political Left and Right, serve as the connective tissue that allows one to suggest the presence of a shared political philosophy. Up to this point, however, the political philosophy of neoconservatism has been largely defined in terms of what it is not, or in terms of the policies and theories to which it stood opposed.

A sketch of at least three basic tenets of neoconservatism is, however, within our reach. There is, first and foremost, a consistent appeal for tethering American foreign policy to morality. This meant that during the Cold War differences between the American and Soviet systems of government had to be taken seriously, and thus the aim of superpower cooperation should be careful not to dull the edges of the very real ideological divide. In fact, for neoconservatives, the kind of cooperation encouraged by détente was a tactical and strategic mistake as it undermined the support by the American people for making the requisite sacrifices to wage the Cold War while it also provided the Soviets a chance to pursue their objective of worldwide revolution with a freer hand. As examined earlier in this chapter, Kissinger felt strongly that because of the risk of nuclear war it was imperative for the United States to direct its diplomatic efforts toward the creation of a legitimate world
order that would envelop the revolutionary power of the Soviet Union. Neoconservatives argued instead that it was only by way of a strong moral stand against Soviet power that the Cold War could be effectively fought - with success in the Cold War understood as the best defense against the risk of nuclear war.

A moral stand of the kind advocated by neoconservatism implied that there was something worse than nuclear Armageddon. Within the policies of détente and MAD theory, neoconservatives identified the presence of a harmful morality that placed too great an emphasis on the elegance of the solution and too little emphasis on its consequences, specifically, what it meant for the internal character of the nation. This approach risked something much worse than the destruction of American cities or the death of a large number of US citizens. It risked, literally, the destruction of the American body politic. Joseph Cropsey, a student and colleague of Leo Strauss, once wrote that while the rebuilding of a city is a doable thing, “the resurrection of a regime… is a thing rarely seen.”

The Constitution subverted, liberty disappears, and the human flotsam remaining suffer the ultimate demoralization, which is not death but subjection to the ultimate will of a master. Those who would investigate war and peace as part of the moral problem may never stray out of sight of the fact that the necessary condition for all morality is freedom, and the condition for freedom is the absolute integrity of the body politic - guaranteed by the power and willingness to make war.

This leads to a second tenet of neoconservatism, which holds that a failure of nerve - and the sloppy reasoning to which this often gives rise - can have disastrous strategic, political and moral consequences. This was evident in the Wohlstetterian critique of MAD theory.

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228 Ibid., 180-181.
There, the challenge of establishing an effective nuclear deterrent against the Soviet Union led to a series of bizarre counterfactuals and bad policy. While all people of common sense can agree about the nature of nuclear war, it does not logically follow that preparation for war - because it is painful or because it compels one to think about horrors that one would otherwise wish to avoid - is itself immoral. To the contrary, a failure to do the hard work of empirical analysis and to rely instead on clever games and counterintuitive theories can have the opposite effect - leaving the US military more vulnerable and subjecting the whole of humanity to a choice of either mass suicide or surrender. The logic of Wohlstetter’s analysis of MAD theory had an enormous impact on the growth of neoconservatism. It also led to the observation that it was not the proper measure of a theory that it deny or disparage common sense, as many in the scientific community believed at the time. Quoting Wohlstetter, although “analysis is needed,” it is not needed “to replace intuition, but to sharpen it and supplement it.”

The emphasis on common sense as both an arbiter of, and basis for, sound theory emerges as a third, and arguably, the most important, tenet of neoconservatism. The reliance on common sense is a self-conscious act by neoconservatives - remember Nathan Glazer’s description of neoconservatism as nothing more than “fact and common sense.” In his book, The Moral Sense, James Q. Wilson goes a step further in his effort to counter the influence of intellectuals who have taught that morality “has no basis in science or logic.” Wilson seeks to refute contemporary intellectuals - the same ones for whom Irving Kristol reserves special contempt - by arguing that moral judgments are not an “arbitrary” or culturally specific phenomenon but rather are rooted in a “common moral sense” or, in

other words, “an intuitive or directly felt belief about how one ought to act” that is shared by a “majority of people” in all places and at all times.\textsuperscript{230} Rigorously applied, common sense serves as a kind of self-defense for neoconservatives against the counterintuitiveness and moral and political relativism of twentieth century political, strategic and moral theory.

But what does it mean to say that neoconservatives share a political philosophy based on common sense? If common sense is something that all reasonable people share, why is it not obvious to men like Kissinger, Brodie and Schelling that some of their theories are refuted by it? Moreover, why is it that some of these same theorists dismiss the usefulness of common sense in dealing with complex issues? What can we make of this tendency to denigrate its role in matters of strategy, politics and morality? To a certain extent, the technical complexity of a problem, say, creating a viable nuclear deterrence against Soviet attack, can be so overwhelming that the inclination is to push aside the straightforward solution in favor of a novel (read counterintuitive) approach. This was undoubtedly a contributing factor in the debates at RAND during the 1950s as well as in the policy making of the Kennedy Administration in the early 1960s. But this answer does not go far enough in explaining the ease with which the standard of common sense has been swept aside.

In following Kissinger’s political thought as it found expression in the policy of détente, there is ample evidence of common sense, and the moral and political distinctions that follow from it, being subordinated to a conception of history which finds meaning in the actions of great statesmen in what is otherwise a meaningless passage of time. Though inspired by Kant’s epistemology and definition of human freedom, Kissinger never accepted

the implications of Kantian eschatology, or the view that history is purposeful and deterministic.231 Kissinger saw no ultimate purpose to history. Rather, he saw in history a playground for ambitious and creative statesmen to develop a legitimate world order defined, not by notions of moral right and wrong, but by stability or the absence of chaos. Moreover, while Kant saw the noumenal realm as the place where human freedom might escape the reach of empirical science, for Kissinger it was only by being fully embedded in history that superlative human beings - those chosen few - could be truly free by creating reality for themselves and others.

An analysis of historical phenomena reveals but the inevitability inherent in completed action. Freedom, on the other hand, testifies to an act of self-transcendence which overcomes the inexorability of events by infusing them with its spirituality. The ultimate meaning of history - as of life - we can find only within ourselves.232

While Kissinger’s idiosyncratic conception of history is not the focus of this study, it serves to justify the charge, by neoconservatives and others, that there is an absence of any moral or political reference that stands outside, or independent, of Kissinger the man. The core of Kissinger’s political philosophy is an illustrative example of twentieth century historicism and presents a challenge common to many of his contemporaries - a challenge that neoconservatism implicitly addressed. As Peter Dickson observed, “the fundamental problem for Kissinger… became how to transcend the past and negate time through the


exercise of personal will.” 233 Thus, though Kissinger was openly disdainful of the scientific positivism that informed the approach of his immediate predecessors in the field of international relations, he provided for a conception of history and knowledge that, in its moral and political relativism, necessitated its own “revaluation of all values” 234 (Morgenthau) based on the will of the statesman. This was necessary in order to bring about a legitimate international order that offered a chance at world peace.

Kissinger’s historicism was also deeply tragic - again, similar to his realist predecessors:

The Statesman is therefore like one of the heroes in classical drama who has had a vision of the future but who cannot transmit it directly to his fellow-men and who cannot validate its “truth.” But statesmen must act as if their intuition were already experience, as if their aspiration were truth. It is for this reason that statesmen often share the fate of prophets, that they are without honor in their own country, that they always have a difficult task in legitimizing their programmes domestically, and that their greatness is usually apparent only in retrospect when their intuition has become experience. The statesman must be an educator; he must bridge the gap between the people’s experience and his vision, between a nation’s tradition and its future. 235

Against this and other examples of twentieth century historicism, neoconservatism preserved the standard of common sense in an effort to judge the moral rightness or wrongness of various policy choices and theories of international relations or, at a bare minimum, to cast light on their sheer implausibility. But the thing most peculiar about the neoconservative reliance on the standard of common sense is not the difficulty of providing an

233 Dickson, 46.

234 Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 489.

epistemological justification for it but, rather, the need to mount a defense in the first place. What explains this peculiar experience? Why does common sense require an apology? Surely, reasonable human beings may disagree at the margins, but common sense does not present so great a challenge that reasonable men and women can not agree on its existence or relevance to politics and everyday life? Surely, reasonable men and women can see the merits to Wohlstetter’s exhortation that expert analysis should serve as a supplement to common sense and not its refutation?

In the twentieth century, however, common sense did require intellectual support because it was eroded, first, by positivism and its foundation on the fact/value distinction and, subsequently, in the reaction by social and political scientists to the logical shortcomings of positivism. Both positivism and what has become known as neopositivism have had an enormous impact on the study of international relations and present the reader with a form of moral and political relativism the basis for which seems to be the personal will of its proponents, scholars and statesmen alike. Put differently, the orthodoxy of 20th century political and social theory which held that the conflict between ethics and politics was insoluble is, I suggest in the next two chapters, a consequence of power politics tout court. I suggest furthermore that neoconservatism represents in its disagreement with policies like MAD and détente a way beyond relativism and historicism and points toward a political philosophy whose basis rests on the unassisted reason common to all reasonable men and women.

It is in the teachings of Leo Strauss that the charge that positivism dissolves into historicism and relativism was first made in the mid-twentieth century. It is furthermore in Strauss’ treatment of the fact/value distinction, as articulated by its leading proponent, Max
Weber, where we find the argument that common sense, in an age of ideology, does indeed require a defense. It is therefore to the writings of Leo Strauss that our study of neoconservatism must turn in order to properly contextualize the significance of the neoconservative reaction against MAD theory, the politics of the new Left as well as what one might call the new Right, embodied by Kissinger and the policy of détente.
CHAPTER 3

STRAUSS, WEBER, MORGENTHAU AND NEOCONSERVATISM: A CRITIQUE OF MODERN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORY

To properly situate neoconservatism within the larger field of international relations, it is helpful to contrast its conceptual logic with the dominant theoretical traditions of the 20th Century, modern realism, and, in the following chapter (Chapter 4), its intellectual offspring, neorealism. The differences in conceptual logic have their origin in neoconservatism’s concern that realism does not provide a solid basis for explaining why people and states would logically follow its dictates. Because realism lacks a sense of mission that appeals to anything beyond individual or state self-interest - with self-interest defined in the academic literature as the quest for power and selfishness - it cannot provide an account of how or why individuals and states make the sacrifices they do, examples of which abound throughout history and in everyday experience. For neoconservatives, realism’s

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236 In this chapter, all references to realism, unless otherwise indicated, will be based on Hans Morgenthau’s definition which is founded on the triad of human selfishness and lust for power, perpetual conflict at the individual and state level, and the concept of national interest itself founded on a particular definition of state. The first two assumptions help explain Morgenthau’s tragic conception of life, and, as such, position him similarly to Max Weber.

237 The contrast in conceptual logic has recently been captured by Michael C. Williams, “What is the National Interest? The Neoconservative Challenge to IR Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations*, June, 2003, 307-337. The Williams article is the first that I have found which address the differences in conceptual logic between neoconservatism and contemporary IR theory at such a foundational level.
narrow focus on self-interest leads to the same excess as contemporary liberalism and this led logically, if not always in practice, to nihilism.

Neoconservatism’s concern regarding the absence of an obvious sense of purpose in the theories espoused by realists and contemporary liberals, as well as the nihilistic consequences of modern thought, is best captured in two separate quotations. The first is by William Kristol and Robert Kagan and mirrors the argument by Norman Podhoretz in his critique of détente. Addressing as much their conservative brethren as their liberal critics, Kristol and Kagan call for a “Neo-Reaganite foreign policy” because, in their opinion

…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 US hegemony.238

The second quotation is from Irving Kristol and captures the concern that modernity is challenged most profoundly by its own nihilistic implications. At a moment of increased tension between the superpowers during the Cold War, Kristol observed:

While many critics predicted a dissolution of this (liberal-bourgeois) society under certain stresses and strains, none predicted – none could have predicted – the blithe and mindless self-destruction of bourgeois society which we are witnessing today. The enemy of liberal capitalism today is not so much socialism as it is nihilism. Only liberal capitalism doesn’t see nihilism as an enemy, but rather as just another splendid business opportunity.239

What these two statements have in common is a fear that contemporary liberals and modern realists have lost their moral bearings and their thought has become logically self-defeating. For neoconservatives, contemporary liberalism has slipped into nihilism as a result of its dogged emphasis on the right of individuals to pursue their self-interest unencumbered by societal limits. While self-interest is an important component to classical liberalism, it was historically understood as confined to the bailiwick of what was most immediate to the individual. At the level of society, individual interests could be rightfully limited as the good of society often conflicts with individual self-interest, narrowly defined. The most notable example of this is in times of war. In a state whose citizens are driven by self-interest defined by the hobbesian right to self-preservation, why on earth would a rational, self-interested individual risk life and limb in order to save god, queen or country? When taken to such extremes - and for neoconservatives the 1960s were one such period of extremism in the United States - a single-minded focus on self-interest can easily become equated with self-gratification or hedonism, leading to moral relativism and reducing life to a “meaningless” state. For Irving Kristol, just “as the history of 20th-Century modernism in the arts demonstrates, the pursuit of self suffers the same fate as the pursuit of happiness - he who is merely self-seeking shall find nothing but infinite emptiness.”240 This is as true at the level of the individual for neoconservatives as it is at the level of the state; both require inspiration and a sense of purpose or the situation quietly becomes untenable. Yet modern realism no more provides a sense of purpose than does contemporary liberalism. “Just ask Kissinger,” Michael Ledeen famously asked, “without a mission, it is only a matter of time


240Ibid, 254.
before public opinion will turn against any American administration that acts like an old fashioned European state.” 241

In the previous chapter, it was suggested that a root cause of the moral relativism common to much of 20th Century strategic and political theory, and the nihilism to which this logically led, was found in the rejection of common sense as the starting point for theory-making. It was further suggested that the rejection of common sense was not something that could simply be corrected by pointing to the logical (even disastrous) consequences of various public policies like MAD and détente; its rejection was too profound for even the “frontal assaults” (Steinfels) of neoconservatives to have a lasting effect. Rather, it was suggested that common sense itself required a defense because its rejection was epistemological in origin for much of 20th Century social and political science. Though neoconservatives like Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz never shied away from attacking policies with which they disagreed, they also sought to understand the philosophical and epistemological basis for their opponent’s views. In their quest to understand the character of modern relativism and nihilism, these men were influenced by the thought of Leo Strauss.

Strauss’ intellectual influence is evident at several points in the biographies of the first and second generation of neoconservatives. In the following chapter, I suggest that his influence extended beyond his resurrection of the classic notion of regime to include his critique of modern social science and what he called the “new political science.” 242 Strauss was the first to flesh out in detail the nihilistic consequences of a “value-free” social science.


242“An Epilogue” found in Leo Strauss, L-AM.
Importantly, his critique of modern social science allows us to more adequately explain the differences in conceptual logic between neoconservatives and realists.243

Strauss’ critique of modern social science is found in Natural Right & History in a chapter on the thought of its most articulate proponent, Max Weber. Here, Strauss provides a philosophical defense of common sense by disclosing how social science, and all social inquiry for that matter, rests on some commonly accepted reference point or point of view. Barring a lengthy philosophical discourse regarding which point of view is best, social scientists, Weber included, must rely on their own common sense regarding the most basic questions of their inquiry. To pretend otherwise is “to combine the advantages of common sense with the denial of common sense,” Strauss observed.244 According to Strauss, however this is precisely what Weber does. Weber’s argument, through various twists and turns, ends up rejecting the arbiter of common sense in his effort to create a truly “value free” social science. Along the way, it robs social inquiry of any mutually agreed upon points of reference. Weber’s emphasis on logically separating questions of objective fact (the transhistorical and objective element of science) from the bias of cultural or personal values (the historically contingent and subjective element of human life) had the paradoxical effect, for Strauss, of reducing objective facts, as well as the very idea of science, to the level of values, the acceptance of which was to be determined solely by personal preference. The fact/value distinction in Weber’s methodological writings meant that the direction of social inquiry was ultimately reduced to the whims, or personal values, of the social scientist. Furthermore, Weber’s rejection of common sense and philosophy meant that nothing

243I will argue in the next chapter that these differences also pertain to neorealism and the other major theoretical traditions in the study of international relations.

244Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History, 53.
logically remained to convince students of social and political science of the veracity of a
given premise expect for the will or aspiration of the individual social or political scientist.
Social inquiry and politics became, in short, little more than a power play.245

Max Weber’s thought influenced a generation of scholars in the United States,
including the foremost realist of the twentieth century, Hans J. Morgenthau.246 Weber’s
influence on Morgenthau is most apparent in the ease with which the latter is capable of
brushing aside talk of values. Morgenthau emphasizes instead weberian considerations of
power, national interest and a tragic conception of human existence. Like Weber,
Morgenthau’s tragic conception of human existence left him despondent and flailing in
search of possible, albeit highly improbable, cures for the human condition. This consisted
of an appeal to a nietzschean like “revaluation of all values” in the hope that world peace, the
sole rational objective in the nuclear age, could be achieved by way of eradicating the natural
human propensity to believe in the moral rightness of their beliefs.247 This stunningly bold
appeal has the effect of leaving Morgenthau, the social scientist, as the chief expositor of the
values society should embrace in the future. Morgenthau’s appeal embodies a logical
consequence of weberian social science, which defies the standard of common sense and
embraces a form of political and moral extremism. In contrast, neoconservatism relies on

(New York: Harper and Row, 1971), cited in Smith, Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger. My argument goes beyond Aron’s,
which took the view that “Weber had chosen the power of the national state as the ultimate value, and this choice was free
and arbitrary” (Smith, 28).

Frei examines the impact of Karl Rottenbacher’s seminar on Weber whilst Morgenthau was a student at university in
Munich. Frei quotes Morgenthau as writing that “Weber’s political thought possessed all the intellectual and moral qualities
I had looked for in vain in the contemporary literature inside and outside the universities.”

247Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 489. In questioning the will of nations to do what is necessary for world
peace, Morgenthau writes that “they are not prepared to perform that revaluation of all values, that unprecedented moral
and political revolution, which would force the nation from its throne and put the political organization of humanity on it.”
the standard of common sense and the moral perspective of the average person and in so
doing offers students of international politics an alternate conceptual choice.

Common Sense or a Pre-Scientific Understanding of the World

Prior to tackling Strauss’ critique of modern social and political science, we must
understand the importance he attached to common sense.\textsuperscript{248} While explaining the meaning
of common sense may seem a bit like explaining the meaning of a joke - if you have to,
you’ve lost your audience already - it is a necessity in the modern world because, according
to Strauss, “our primary awareness of things as things and people as people” has come to be
covered by layers and layers of abstraction. It is especially important because Strauss’
disagreement with modern political science has been historically interpreted as “hostile and
destructive,” with his respect for the role of common sense dismissed as lacking in “critical
analysis.”\textsuperscript{249}

Strauss begins his defense by agreeing with modern political science on one thing:
political science is an empirical exercise. This, Strauss explains in the \textit{Epilogue}, “is a demand
of common sense.”\textsuperscript{250} After all, no one can say anything meaningful about this or that
political event or institution “expect by looking at” it. But modern political scientists have a
very different understanding of what constitutes an empirical statement than did their

\textsuperscript{248}My brief review of Strauss’ thoughts on common sense borrows heavily from Michael Zuckert, “Why Leo
Strauss is Not an Aristotelian: an Exploratory Study” (presented at the American Political Science Association annual
meeting in Chicago on August 31, 2007).


predecessors who followed in the tradition of Aristotle. Modern political scientists are committed to empiricism, as such, which for Strauss is founded on “the explicit assumption of a specific epistemology.” Put differently, empiricism is a theory based on recognition of the “naiveté” or inadequacy of common sense or of a pre-scientific understanding of the world. “Common sense understanding,” Strauss tells us, “is understanding in terms of ‘things processing qualities.’” But empiricists are unhappy with this definition of “things” as “they contend that what is perceived or ‘given’ is only sense data” and “the ‘things’ which to common sense are presented as ‘given’ are in truth constructs.”

Scientific understanding, therefore, comes into being when the naiveté of the pre-scientific is fully recognized and understanding by means of “unconscious construction” is replaced by “understanding by means of conscious construction”: “Unconscious constructs are ill made, for their making is affected by all sorts of purely ‘subjective’ influences; only conscious constructs can be well made, perfectly lucid, in every respect the same for everyone, or, ‘objective’.”  

Modern political and social science thus rejects the pre-scientific understanding, but Strauss, following Husserl, maintains that this is a delusion.

Husserl… realized more profoundly than anybody else that the scientific understanding of the world, far from being the perfection of our natural understanding, is derivative from the latter in such a way as to make us oblivious of the very foundations of the scientific understanding: all philosophic understanding must start from a common understanding of the world, for our understanding of this world as sensibly perceived prior to all theorizing.

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251 Ibid., 212.
252 Ibid.
Strauss draws an obvious conclusion: “Empiricism cannot be established empiricistically: it is not known through sense data that the only possible objects of perception are sense data.”\textsuperscript{254} One can only establish or attempt to establish empiricism “through the same kind of perception through which we perceive things as things rather than sense data or constructs.” Or, “in other words, sense data as sense data become known only through an act of abstraction or disregard which presupposes the legitimacy of our primary awareness of things as things and of people as people.”\textsuperscript{255} Empiricism begins, then, with the same naïve pre-scientific understanding of the world and only through an elaborate process of abstraction does “sense data become known as sense data.” As a result of its rejection of common sense, empiricism must reject too that “understanding by which political life, political understanding, political experience, stands or falls.”\textsuperscript{256}

Strauss acknowledges that the pre-scientific or common sense understanding is not itself sufficient for political or social life. One must move from it, but one must do so in a way that remains grounded on a pre-scientific or common sense understanding (this is unavoidable, at any rate) with an honest acknowledgement of that grounding. That is difficult because the long history of Western philosophy and science has obscured, although not destroyed, our pre-scientific awareness of the world. “To grasp the natural world as a world that is radically prescientific or prephilosophic, one has to go back behind the first emergence of science or philosophy,” for “common sense” or “natural world” is already

\textsuperscript{254}Strauss, LAM, 212.
\textsuperscript{255}Ibid., 213.
\textsuperscript{256}Ibid., 212.
transformed by centuries of theoretical apprehension of it: “The world in which we live is already a product of science.”

Strass, Neoconservatism, & the Critique of Modern Nihilism:

Tying Strauss to neoconservatism exposes one to a political minefield. In the popular press, since at least the beginning of 2003, Strauss has cast a long, sinister shadow over a political movement that had only recently been named at the time of his death. The reason for this is fairly straightforward. Several former students of Strauss and of Strauss’ students, most notably Paul Wolfowitz and William Kristol, are strongly identified with neoconservatism and, in the build-up to the War in Iraq, the connection proved irresistible for the press. Disappointingly, the popular image of Strauss as puppeteer extolled by the press since 2003 has as its immediate origins a pamphlet circulated in the US capital in March of that year by the political affiliates of perennial US presidential candidate, and grand conspiricist and anti-Semite, Lyndon LaRouche.

Be that as it may, there does indeed exist some obvious connections between Strauss and neoconservatism. We know the connection to be real because his influence has been

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257 Strauss, NRH, 79.


260 See Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads* on the relation of Strauss’ influence on neoconservatism, in particular, his emphasis on the notion of regime (21-31).
openly acknowledged. Irving Kristol wrote of the “intellectual shock” of reading Strauss, describing it as a “once-in-a-lifetime experience,” and his colleagues at The Public Interest have spoken of how lunch hour conversations would frequently drift to the topic of Leo Strauss.\textsuperscript{261} His son, William Kristol, portrayed the Bush Administration’s “advocacy of ‘regime change’” in Iraq as “a not altogether unworthy product of Strauss’s rehabilitation of the notion of regime.”\textsuperscript{262} Strauss has widely been credited for resurrecting the ancient notion of regime, a very unmodern notion that came from his readings of Plato and Aristotle and pertained to the way a political order informed, and was itself informed by, the character of its citizens. Indeed, it is difficult to read Strauss and not be struck by the unmodern way in which he approaches the identifying characteristics of states. His focus pertains not to the institutional structure of its government, nor does he accept the modern premise introduced by Thomas Hobbes that the sole purpose of government is the self-preservation of its citizens. Rather, Strauss looks to the psychology of the place, its habits and its customs, as well as its order of rule or constitution, as the best means to define what is unique about any given state. Regime is understood by Strauss as the “way of life of a society” and is closely linked to how a society understands itself. Democracy, for example, emphasizes equality and “regards as the authoritative human type ‘the common man.’” Strauss writes:

When the authoritative type is the common man, everything has to justify itself before the tribunal of the common man; everything which cannot be justified before

\textsuperscript{261}Joseph Dorman, Arguing the World (New York: The Free Press, 2000). See p. 201 and Mark Lilla’s comment regarding Irving Kristol’s interest in his (Lilla’s) studies on Leo Strauss.

that tribunal becomes, at best, merely tolerated, if not despised or suspect. And even those who do not recognize that tribunal are, willy-nilly, molded by its verdict.263

Importantly, Strauss resurrected the concept of tyranny, a regime common to classical political philosophy, and commented frequently on the inability of modern political science to recognize it for what it is.264

The notion of regime was critical to Norman Podhoretz’s critique of détente and its implicit premise that the Soviet Union was a status quo power with whom the United States could “do business.”265 The Soviet Union of course was not a normal state; it was a revolutionary and pernicious power for Podhoretz and détente was impossible. The character of the Soviet regime therefore mattered in assessing the prospects of US diplomacy. William Kristol and Steven Lenzner add to this their own thoughts on how the notion of regime may have a moderating effect on foreign policy decision-making because it “avoids the unhealthy extremes of utopian universalism and insular nationalism.” It avoids these pitfalls because it strikes a blow at both cultural determinism, or the belief that a state is a function purely of history and circumstance, and “wishful global universalism,” the belief that regardless of a state’s regime all states can cooperate peacefully and “do business” with one another.266

263Steven Lenzner & William Strauss, 5; interior quotes are by Strauss (Natural Right & History) as is the paragraph text.

264Leo Strauss, OT.

265Jeffers, 208.

266Steven Lenzner & William Kristol, “What Was Strauss Up To?,” 11.
Kristol and Lenzner demonstrate a familiarity with Strauss’ writings that stretches beyond the notion of regime to include Strauss’ rediscovery of the differences between the ancients and the moderns, the art of writing, and the epistemological shortcomings of modern social science. Strauss’ influence with these writers is explained partly by the fact that both were students of Harvey Mansfield, a scholar and teacher of Strauss’ method. But, as noted, Strauss’ influence was equally visible in the founding generation of neoconservatism, specifically, in the intellectual development of Irving Kristol.267

In a 1952 book review of Strauss’ Persecution and The Art of Writing, Kristol demonstrates a familiarity with what was arguably one of the more challenging texts in the Straussian corpus.268 He demonstrates a familiarity also with some of Strauss’ larger thoughts such as the irreconcilable tension between Athens and Jerusalem, or between reason and revelation. In his review, Kristol goes out of his way to praise Strauss’ writing style and his significance as a scholar.

Professor Strauss writes in a bold and masculine style; his sentences are unambiguous; his paragraphs are lucid; but his reasoning is so close and subtle that one often finds that the thread has been lost...And if in time the victory (of argument) goes to Professor Strauss, he will have accomplished nothing less than a revolution in intellectual history, and most of us will...have to go back to school to learn the wisdom of the past that we thought we knew.269

Kristol’s review must be taken within the context of the almost universal resistance by Strauss’ peers to the suggestion that many of the great works in the Western canon should

267Murray Friedman, The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy. Friedman recognizes Strauss and Will Herberg as two of the most important intellectual influences on neoconservatives, 40-41.


269Ibid., 397.
not be taken at face value, but, instead, that it was necessary to ‘read between the lines.’

Kristol’s “intellectual shock” in reading Strauss took place at a time when many critics wrote mocking and scathing criticisms of Strauss’ apparent “fanaticism.”

Though there exists no textual link between Strauss’ critique of Max Weber or “the new political science” and Irving Kristol, or any other neoconservative for that matter – i.e. no book review, no extended commentary, etc. - it is a reasonable assumption given Kristol’s familiarity with the subtleties of Strauss’ thought and the subsequent neoconservative warnings regarding the nihilism of contemporary liberalism, that Strauss’ own critique of the nihilistic implications of modern social and political science struck a profound chord in the intellectual progression of neoconservatism. After all, Strauss signals in his more polemical writings that he sought “to win the sympathy of the best men of the coming generation - those youth who possess the intellectual and the moral qualities which prevent men from simply following authorities, to say nothing of fashions.”

I suggest that Strauss’ critique of modern social and political science helps explain what is otherwise a gap in our understanding of neoconservatism that has to do with the differences in conceptual logic between neoconservatism and the more orthodox theoretical approaches to the study of international relations. Specifically, a reading of Strauss’ critique of Weber will help position what I argue is a neoconservative epistemology founded on common sense and which stands opposed to the epistemology of modern IR theory as put forth in the writings of theorists like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz.

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270 For a review of the controversy this has engendered, see Catherine and Michael Zuckert, The Truth About Leo Strauss, chapter 4.


272 Strauss, LAM, 204.
With his conclusion that “positivism necessarily transforms itself into historicism,” Strauss issues a broad indictment of “all present-day thought.” For Strauss, “the spirit of our time is historicism,” as the orthodoxy among political and social scientists at mid-twentieth century was unanimous in its rejection of natural right “in the name of History and in the name of the distinction between Facts and Values.”

Historicism, or the belief that all values are relative to a particular time and place, was a response to the foundational and epistemological problem of modernity. According to Strauss, however, the historicism of “present-day thought” came in two distinct variants. One is encapsulated by Heidegger’s response to modernity and the establishment of radical historicism, or the absolute rejection of the notion of timeless values in favor of the belief that all values are contingent on one’s culture and history; the second variant came by way of the methodological studies of Max Weber, which represented an attempt to at least preserve the notion that the idea of science was transhistorical, that logic itself was a timeless value for all human beings everywhere. Ultimately, the very possibility of timeless values was rejected by Weber because like “many present-day social scientists who are not historicists or who do admit the existence of fundamental and unchanging alternatives,” Weber denied the possibility of sorting through conflicting timeless values on the basis of reason alone. Strauss presents his conclusion regarding weberian social science in the opening paragraphs of his critique:

Natural right is then rejected today not only because all human thought is held to be historical but likewise because it is thought that there is a variety of unchangeable

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principles of right and goodness which conflict with one another, and none of which can be proved to be superior to the others.²⁷⁴

How does Strauss move from Weber’s apparent belief in the timeless value of science to the conclusion that, for Weber, “the idea of science or philosophy suffers from a fatal weakness”? Or, put differently, how does Weber’s reliance on the fact/value distinction undermine his stated belief in the timelessness of science?²⁷⁵ Strauss proceeds to show that Weber’s argument regarding the timeless value of science “was halfhearted and inconsistent with the broad tendency of his thinking.”²⁷⁶

The attachment to the idea of science as something permanent was indisputable for Weber as its “superiority can be established objectively, by reference to the rules of logic.” Rules of logic were thought to be everywhere the same. But logic, like the social sciences, was simply the means employed to provide pre-determined ends their practical significance. Weber

…insisted on the objective and universal validity of social science in so far as it is a body of true propositions. Yet these propositions are only a part of social science. They are the results of scientific investigation or answers to questions. The questions which we address to social phenomena depend on the direction of our interest or our point of view, and these on our value ideas. But the value ideas are historically relative. Hence the substance of social science is radically historical; for it is the value ideas and the direction of interest which determine the whole conceptual framework of the social sciences.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴Strauss, NRH, 36.
²⁷⁵Ibid., 75-76.
²⁷⁶Ibid., 37.
²⁷⁷Ibid., 38.
The problem with Weber’s efforts to separate objective fact (the transhistorical and objective element of science) from the bias of personal or cultural values (the historically contingent and subjective element of human life) is that science has meaning precisely because certain cultures understand it to be of value. All science, natural science included, “presupposes that science is valuable, but this presupposition is the product of certain cultures, and hence historically relative,” Strauss observed. Despite this, Strauss concedes that if science were indeed transhistorical, then Weber’s devotion to the idea of science could be logically sustained. But this amounts to the claim that the idea of science can be rationally defended and this, Strauss argues, was denied by Weber’s rejection of “the true value system.”

Strauss opens his critique of the fact/value distinction with the comment that Weber “never explained what he understood by values.” Nonetheless, Weber was quite concerned with the relationship of facts to values and he remained convinced throughout his life that the two were distinct in character. Weber drew a line between understanding and approval. One may well understand the ends of a given social order but one does not logically pass judgment on “the value or desirable character of that order.” Weber took this distinction of facts and values to imply “the ethically neutral character of social science: social science can answer questions of fact and their causes: it is not competent to answer questions of value.” Social science must refer to values, for without reference to values there would be no way to escape from the directionless abundance of social phenomena. But “reference to values” and “value judgments” were two separate acts for Weber. “By saying that something is

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278Ibid., 39, 41.
relevant with regard to political freedom, for example, one does not take a stand for or against political freedom.”

Weber insisted that his argument for an “ethically neutral” social science was justified by “the opposition of the Is and the Ought, or the opposition of reality and norm or value.” But Strauss argues that this opposition of the Is and the Ought does not logically lead to the prohibition against an “evaluating social science.” Strauss asks his reader to assume for a moment that “we had genuine knowledge of right and wrong, or of the Ought, or of the true value system.” Whether this knowledge was derived from empirical science or not, it “would legitimately direct all empirical social science” because it is the function of social science to “find means for given ends.” Thus “based on genuine knowledge of the true ends, social science would search for the proper means to those ends; it would lead to objective and specific value judgments regarding policies,” according to Strauss. It would no longer be logically acceptable, then, for social science to insist on a distinction between “reference to values” and “value judgments” because means logically follow from ends and these means would therefore contain the moral force of an Ought. They would thus comprise the “true value system.” Strauss concludes that

…the true reason why Weber insisted on the ethically neutral character of social science as well as of social philosophy was, then, not his belief in the fundamental opposition of the Is and the Ought but his belief that there cannot be any genuine knowledge of the Ought. He denied to man any science, empirical or rational, any knowledge, scientific or philosophic, of the true value system: the true value system does not exist; there is a variety of values which are the same rank, whose demands conflict with one another, and whose conflict cannot be solved by human reason.

279Ibid., 40.

280Ibid., 41, 42.
The belief in the opposition of the Is and the Ought is a product of “present-day thought,” or, more precisely, it is the result of the modern understanding of nature. It is not, as Weber suggests, “utterly trivial in itself” because the truth of this belief has not been established by modern science. Strauss exposes a tension in Weber’s thought that Weber was unaware of, in part, because Weber remained convinced throughout his life of a Kantian definition of ethics. This belief in Kantian ethics was, for Strauss, “not much more than the residue of a tradition in which (Weber) was brought up.”

Notwithstanding this long held belief of his, Kantian ethics, according to Weber, was useless as a guide for social science or cultural norms because of the inherent tension between the demands of society and the demands of Kant’s categorical imperative. Ethics and culture appeal separately to one’s conscience and feelings. The gap between individual ethics and cultural values was unbridgeable for Weber because, while at first sight it might appear that ethical commands were absolute, they were, in fact, just as subjective as cultural values. It is just as legitimate for Weber to “bear the burden of ethical guilt for the sake of politics as it is to bear the burden of political irresponsibility for the sake of ethics.” Thus, Strauss argues, Weber “could not reconcile his view that ethics is silent about the right social order with the undeniable ethical relevance of social questions, except by ‘relativizing’

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282 Strauss, NRH, 43.

But this tension between ethical commands and cultural relativism is untenable because morality and society are too intertwined to be treated separately.

**Weber's Nihilism and Immoderate Politics**

Where does this leave Weber's thought and his understanding of the social sciences? Strauss contends that “Weber’s thesis necessarily leads to nihilism or to the view that every preference, however evil, base, or insane, has to be judged before the tribunal of reason to be as legitimate as any other preference.” Weber suggests that he understands as much when confronted with the alternative before the modern world of “either a spiritual renewal (‘wholly new prophets or a powerful renaissance of old thought and ideals’)” or else “‘the extinction of every possibility but that of ‘specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart.’” Yet, for Strauss, “when confronted with this alternative, Weber felt that the decision in favor of either possibility would be a judgment of value or faith, and hence beyond the competence of reason.” This meant that “the way of life of ‘specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart’ is as defensible as the ways of life recommended by Amos or by Socrates.”

To demonstrate the soundness of his interpretation of Weber's thought, Strauss proceeds “step by step” through Weber’s argument in an effort to demonstrate how Weber
progresses from idealism to fanatical resoluteness to philistinism to, in the final analysis, insanity. Strauss’ argument is lengthy, but it may be summarized in the following manner.

To begin, Weber nowhere acknowledges that his belief that ethical commands are as relative as cultural values leads to nihilism. Rather, Weber employs the relativity of ethics as the basis for a new standard of personality which, incidentally, also supported his conception of leadership and formed the connective tissue between ethics and politics and theory. For Weber, “the true meaning of ‘personality’ depends on the true meaning of ‘freedom.’” But true freedom consists in having a clear conception of true ends and these “ends must be adopted in a certain manner,” i.e., they need to be believed. “Strauss characterizes Weber’s standard of personality in the manner of a categorical imperative: ‘Thou shalt have ideals.’”

Weber’s own formulation was “Follow thy God or demon.” But lacking the ability to distinguish “in principle between good and evil demons,” according to Strauss, “(h)is categorical imperative actually means ‘Follow thy demon, regardless of whether he is a good or evil demon.’” This is necessarily so for Strauss because there exists “an insoluble, deadly conflict between the various values among which man has to choose” - not all ends are created equal, nor are all ends compatible with the ends of one’s neighbor. The one thing necessary, however, for Weber, is that whichever ends one chooses, one must make the choice an authentic one; it must be made “with all your heart.” In “non-theological language,” Weber’s “Follow thy God or demon” means “strive resolutely for excellence or

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287Ibid., 44.
baseness” with excellence implying “devotion to a cause” and baseness “indifference to all causes.” Strauss concludes:

Now if excellence is devotion to a cause and baseness indifference to all causes, the theoretical attitude toward all causes would have to be qualified as base. No wonder, then, that Weber was driven to question the value of theory, of science, of reason, of the realm of the mind, and therewith of both the moral imperatives and the cultural values.

From resoluteness or fanatical devotion to any cause, Weber’s thought devolves into a form of philistinism for Strauss. With an emphasis on intellectual honesty and the rejection of hypocrisy, Weber seems to prefer “one who openly flaunts all conventions and is prepared to shoulder responsibility for his choice” to “one who surreptitiously and hypocritically gratifies his instincts.” At this point, it is no longer possible for Weber to oppose insanity, inconsistency, and irrationality, according to Strauss, for the mere fact that such a claim would itself be irrational, inconsistent and insane. For example, Weber could not rationally insist on the value of being honest for “it is equally legitimate to will or not to will the truth, or to reject the truth in favor of the beautiful and the sacred.” Thus “Weber’s regard for ‘rational self-determination’ and ‘intellectual honesty’ is a trait of his character which has no basis but his nonrational preference for ‘rational self-determination’ and ‘intellectual honesty.’” And while we might be tempted to characterize Weber’s nihilism as “noble

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288Ibid, 45.
289Ibid, 47.
291Ibid, 10.
nihilism,” Strauss argues, we are not permitted this luxury because the knowledge of the noble and the base “transcends nihilism” and breaks with Weber’s own position. 292

Given the shortcomings of Weber’s methodology, which can reach farcical levels as evidenced by Weber’s admission that his method does not allow one to distinguish between a competent or a blundering general, why does he persist? 293 For Strauss the answer is two-fold. One answer is that “many social scientists…regard nihilism as a minor inconvenience which wise men would bear with equanimity, since it is the price one has to pay for obtaining that highest good, a truly scientific social science.” But this does not go far enough in explaining Weber’s devotion to his cause of a “value-free” social science. More relevant for our study is Weber’s belief that “the conflict between ultimate values cannot be resolved by human reason.” The question for Strauss is whether this premise “has been demonstrated or whether it has merely been postulated under the impulse of a specific moral preference.” 294 Strauss suspects the latter, that it represents a moral preference on Weber’s part, a preference for the tragic life.

Let us recall that in trying to develop a truly value-free social science, Weber was forced to contort his thought in ways that allowed him to make value judgments without burdening his theoretical approach. So Weber could speak of “specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart” and not judge the merits of either. “Is this not

292Ibid., 48.

293Ibid., 48, 64.

294Ibid., 48, 64.
absurd,” Strauss asks? For “like every other man who ever discussed social matters,” Weber had to make value judgments, the use of quotation marks (e.g. “peace”) notwithstanding. Yet Weber was so supremely confident that the conflict between ethics and politics was insoluble that he devoted hardly thirty pages of the thousands he wrote to its analysis. Moreover, because political action, for Weber, was impossible without incurring moral guilt, the only way to resolve the conflict between ethics and theory or ethics and politics was through the “spirit of ‘power politics,’” Strauss concludes:

Nothing is more revealing than the fact that, in a related context when speaking of conflict and peace, Weber put “peace” in quotation marks, whereas he did not take this precautionary measure when speaking of conflict. Conflict was for Weber an unambiguous thing, but peace was not: peace is phony, but war is real.

It followed for Weber that because the conflict between ultimate values permitted no solution human life as a whole was defined by inescapable conflict. Peace was therefore not only unrealistic but illegitimate as an aspiration. Weber’s greatest fear was that of a world inhabited by Nietzsche’s last man, a risk exacerbated by the prospect of world peace. A truly human life required conflict and struggle. For Strauss, “the moral problem” presented by Weber “would seem to allow of a clear solution: the nature of things requires a warrior ethics as the basis of a ‘power politics’ that is guided exclusively by considerations of the national interest.” As Weber put it in his inaugural lecture, “The Nation State and Economic Policy:”

295Ibid, 51-52. Strauss calls Weber’s bracketing of moral concepts in quotation marks “a childish trick which enables one to talk of important subjects while denying the principles without which there cannot be important subjects” (53).

296Ibid., 64.
The question which stirs us as we think beyond the grave of our own generation is not the well-being human beings will enjoy in the future but what kind of people they will be, and it is this same question which underlies all the work in political economy. We do not want to breed well-being in people, but rather characteristics which we think of as constituting the human greatness and nobility of our nature.298

The type of human greatness and nobility Weber envisioned for the future was similar to the type of politics he advocated: it was one defined by struggle, conflict and power politics. Critically for our purposes, because Weber’s theory dissolved logically into nihilism and insanity, he was left without any theoretical support for this very tragic conception of human existence. This conception was, in fact, no more than an intellectual power play by Weber. That is, his theory of the human world robbed him of theoretical support for any rational conception of human existence and, into this void, Weber posited, by the sheer force of his will, the conception of life as tragedy.

What is lost in Weber’s tragic conception of human existence, and in his reliance on conflict as the solution to the “moral problem” facing human beings in the modern era, is the individual virtue of nobility and its political counterpart, prudence. Weber’s “unshakeable faith in conflict forced him to have at least as high a regard for extremism as for moderate courses,” Strauss writes. Moreover, Weber’s rejection of the standard of common sense, because of the problematic character of the value judgments inherent to such a pre-scientific understanding of the world, fueled the extremism of his thought. It is precisely when confronted with ideological extremism and relativism that a defense of common sense for Strauss becomes necessary. As Strauss explains in his An Epilogue when

297Ibid., 65.

reviewing the differences between the old political science (originated by Aristotle) and the new (founded on positivism), the modern conceit that practice follows from a theoretical understanding of things, and not the reverse, is one that is alien to the understanding of the world that arises from everyday action or common sense. For Aristotle, as well as for political philosophy up until modernity, it was taken for granted that “the principles of action are the natural ends toward which man is by nature inclined and of which he has by nature some awareness.” This natural awareness “is the necessary condition for his seeking and finding appropriate means for his ends, or for his becoming practically wise or prudent.”

Prudence, for Strauss, is then logically divorced from the epistemology underlying modern social and political science. Yet as a result of the barrage from weberian social science and the orthodoxy of the new political science, prudence is weakened and not capable of defending itself on its own. This is another way of saying that common sense in the modern age requires a theoretical defense, if only to refute the epistemology of those who doubt its relevance.

The sphere governed by prudence is then in principle self-sufficient or closed. Yet prudence is always endangered by false doctrines about the whole of which man is a part, by false theoretical opinions; prudence is therefore always in need of defense against such opinions, and that defense is necessarily theoretical. The theory defending prudence is, however, misunderstood if it is taken to be the basis of prudence.

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299 Strauss, LAM, 205.

300 Ibid., 206.
Morgenthau, Weber, and the Power Play of Modern Realism

At first glance, it would seem that no thinker of the modern era was more disappointed with the efforts of social and political scientists to mirror the methodology of the natural sciences than Hans Morgenthau. In fact, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* is written as a broad attack on “dogmatic scientism,” the origin of which, according to Morgenthau, lies with modern rationalism. Scientism is the “dominating mode of political thought in the Western world;” it is a “political philosophy” that “ends in a scientific theory of society where politics has, at best, a place as the evil finally overcome.” He feels quite strongly that the “scientific theory of society” is inadequate as an approach to the study of politics because “politics is an art and not a science.”

Morgenthau concludes that the scientific study of politics ultimately “calcified” because it went too far in its pursuit of reason; “politics must be understood through reason,” Morgenthau readily agrees, “yet it is not in reason that it finds its model.” By relying on an overly rational conception of politics, scientism devolves into series of “dogmas” because it does not “try to reflect reality as it actually is” but rather “to superimpose upon a recalcitrant reality a theoretical scheme that satisfies the desire for thorough rationalization.”

The failure of scientism screams out for a re-examination of the most basic political problems as Morgenthau understands them:

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302Ibid., 10, 11.
This re-examination must start with the assumption that power politics, rooted in the lust for power which is common to all men, is for this reason inseparable from social life itself. In order to eliminate from the political sphere not power politics – which is beyond the ability of any political philosophy or system – but the destructiveness of power politics, rational faculties are needed which are different from, and superior to, the reason of the scientific age.  

Morgenthau thus points beyond scientism to a more sober understanding of the limits to reason. In the chapter from *Truth and Power* quoted above, he seems to point to common sense as one such limit. But this is by no means Morgenthau’s last word on the subject. Despite his very vocal disavowals, Morgenthau was not immune to the lure of a scientific study of politics. His method mirrors the scientific method in an effort to be descriptive as well as predictive. Yet it also strives to be prescriptive, “to simultaneously seek to explain how states do behave and to point out how states should behave.” In his pursuit, Morgenthau insists on developing so-called “iron laws,” or “elemental truths,” which determine the actual behavior of states. These “iron laws” were meant to form the basis of a more rational approach to the study of politics, one rooted in a conception of human nature defined by the desire for power and selfishness. These laws were also meant to serve as a check against idealism, the single greatest threat in the modern age - especially the variants of “utopianism,” “sentimentalism,” “moralism,” and “perfectionism” that seem so pervasive within American political discourse.

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Morgenthau’s disdain for the “abstract moral principles” of idealists was legendary. His view of the moral justifications of state action was that they were “always and of necessity a pretense.”\textsuperscript{308} Moral principles not only fail to explain the real reason for why people and states act the way they do, but, more worrisome, they serve as a rationalization, \textit{ex post facto}, for the more honest, if base, explanation. His belief was not dissimilar to Weber’s. Critically, the “iron laws” of international relations were meant to capture the inescapability of selfishness and the unyielding desire for power by both person and state alike. For Morgenthau, like Weber, this lent human existence a tragic quality. Now, we know from the biographical and scholarly records that Morgenthau considered Weber one of the most influential thinkers in his development as a theorist and we see this influence most directly in Morgenthau’s assumptions regarding human nature, the state, notions of political responsibility, and the inadmissibility of value judgments in the formation of a rational foreign policy.\textsuperscript{309} The two theorists also share a belief that conflict between different fundamental values (at the level of political philosophy and ideology) cannot be solved rationally, even though Morgenthau accepts with equal vigor the truth of Kant’s categorical imperative as the clearest expression of moral duty. Each one of these assumptions seem almost lifted directly from the pages of Weber’s writings.

This is not to say that there are not meaningful distinctions between the two theorists, nor is it meant to underestimate the influence of other thinkers like Reinhold


Niebuhr, Frederic Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant on Morgenthau’s intellectual development. But the similarities between the two theorists are striking including, in what is most relevant for this study, the logical implications of Morgenthau’s thought. His political thought points us toward the conclusion that, in the end, he too, like Weber, is left with a conceptual framework that is so ambiguous and contradictory that definitive conclusions are more a function of his will and personal aspiration than a logical inference from clear theoretical constructs. Yet there remains one critical difference: whereas Weber chooses perpetual conflict as the solution to the “moral problem” facing his contemporaries, Morgenthau chooses world peace as the only rational solution to the “moral problem” of the nuclear age.

Idealism, Morality and Human Nature

Idealists aspire for a world order based not on balances of power but, according to Morgenthau, on a morality “derived from universally abstract principles.” Idealists tend to assume the “essential goodness and infinite malleability of human nature” and understand the failure to live up to their “abstract principles” to be a result of a “lack of knowledge or understanding.” Idealists place their “trust in education, reform and the sporadic use of force to remedy” defects in the world order. In its Wilsonian and Kantian forms, idealism affirms that democracy is a “prerequisite to permanent peace.” But these aspirations are misguided and hopeless, Morgenthau believes, because idealists fail to appreciate the extent to which people are capable of rationalizing self-interested behavior. And though “this

310Morgenthau, Politics among nations, 3.
311Morgenthau, Scientific Man vs. Power Politics, 52.
capacity for self-deception is mitigated by man’s capacity for transcending himself, for trying to see himself as he might look to others,” this is not possible with regard to moral questions: “where rational, objective knowledge is precluded from the outset, as it is with justice, the propensity for self-deception has free reign.”312

Idealism is not only misguided; it is a dangerous and “morally pernicious” approach to international relations.313 The idealist’s zeal to end all war results in the paradoxical need to wage perpetual war, to wage the war to end all wars. All idealists, from Marx to Wilson, commit themselves to this same fallacy. As a result of their zealotry, “a foreign policy founded upon moral principles rather than the national interest issues, by its inner logic, into the tribalism of religious wars and of nationalistic crusades.” The “supreme paradox” of “a foreign policy which is guided by moral considerations” is that “it puts in jeopardy the very moral values which it intends to promote.” The reason for this is that such a foreign policy leads statesmen to over-commit themselves and leaves their nations “courting disaster.” It is no less than “a policy of national suicide.”314

Morgenthau adheres instead to the belief that “there can be no moral foreign policy which is at variance with the national interest.” The national interest is defined by power and its pursuit and stands opposed to the “utopianism,” “sentimentalism,” “moralism,” and “perfectionism” that dominated US foreign policy following WWII. The national interest is determined in a “dual way,” for Morgenthau. It is determined first by “the objectives to be promoted and by the power available for the pursuit of these objectives.” The principle of

312Morgenthau, Truth and Power, 64-65.


self-preservation also forms a critical component to the national interest. Beyond that, the concept remains an ambiguous one for Morgenthau with the exception of its moral fiber. Morally speaking, the national interest is the pursuit of a “relativistic philosophy and tolerance of other political systems based on different moral principles, which is concomitant of policies based on the national interest, and the precondition of a number of nations living side by in mutual respect and peace.”315 Morality as commonly understood is a meaningless concept unless it is tied to the effective pursuit of the national interest which, in turn, requires that morality be relativized.

In the real world, conflict is often a result of incompatible political philosophies, say, the conflict between communism and liberal democracy. On this point, however, Morgenthau wishes to have it both ways - that war is a function of the selfish pursuit of power regardless of differences in political philosophy and that war is a consequence of ideological struggle. For instance, in Morgenthau’s book, *In Defense of the National Interest*, he comments that “Washington and Moscow are not only the main centers of power, they are also the seats of hostile and competing political philosophies.” The Cold War was no less than “a conflict between two kinds of moral principle, two ways of life.” Elsewhere in the same volume, however, Morgenthau dismisses talk of moral or political differences as explanatory of the Cold War. Instead, we read that the real issue is one of power. The Cold War is not a “contest between virtue and vice but a clash “between the foreign policies of two great powers pursuing incompatible objectives.” He does not define what he means by

315Ibid., 211, 210. My emphasis.
objectives, however, in a later chapter, he affirms flatly that “this (the Cold War) is not a struggle between good and evil, truth and falsehood, but of power with power.”

While Morgenthau goes back and forth regarding the explanatory power of ideology in the Cold War, there is ample reason to believe that the foundation for his political theory follows from a belief that conflicts are “of power with power.” For instance, the interest of a particular state must for Morgenthau therefore be interpreted “primarily, if not exclusively, by the technical considerations of power.” This is also consistent with his conception of human nature. Capturing this unchanging human nature is, one might add, the first objective of Morgenthau’s realism:

Political realism believes that politics...is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature...Human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavored to discover these laws.

What exactly is the unchanging character of human beings? Human beings are, first and foremost, selfish beings, according to Morgenthau: “Whatever man does or intends to do emanates from himself and refers again to himself.” It is not possible for human beings to transcend selfishness because, to do so, would be self-destructive. Foregoing selfishness would also, paradoxically, make it impossible for human beings to adhere to the demands of morality because morality, defined socially, is the mere aggregation of individual selfishness.

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317Tucker, 215.

Given this paradox, “man cannot hope to be good but must be content to be evil.”319 Though the desire for power is closely related to selfishness, it is not identical with it. Selfish acts have an “objective relation to the vital needs of the individual”; “The desire for power, on the other hand, concerns itself not with the individual’s survival but with his position among his fellows once his survival has been secured. Consequently, the selfishness of man has limits; his will to power has none.”320 Anticipating ahead, one may expect Morgenthau to aspire for a social mechanism that may control, or sublimate, the apparently insatiable desire for power “into the relatively sanguine realism of Locke and Montesquieu” – a realism that “tries to turn human beings away from the bloody quest for dominion over others and toward a selfish, but peaceful, competition for security and property.”321 Yet this more sanguine interpretation is at first denied by Morgenthau. The desire for power constitutes “the ubiquity of evil in human action.” This desire forms the “essence and aim of politics” and thus politics, as it was for Weber, is inherently evil. This is an insight that is true for all human beings, regardless of history, culture, or moral protestations to the contrary. It is this view of human nature and politics that distinguishes Morgenthau’s realism from idealism. It also implies that politics, properly understood, can never rise above power politics. “Politics is a struggle for power over men, and whatever its ultimate aim may be, power is its immediate goal and the modes of acquiring, maintaining, and demonstrating it determine the technique of political action.”322


320Ibid., 193.

321Pangle and Ahrens, *Justice Among Nations*, 223. Much of the following argument is indebted to their respective interpretation of the history of realism, generally, and of Morgenthau, specifically. For their interpretation of Morgenthau, see Chapter 7 on “Twentieth-Century Realism” from which this quote is taken.

The Real Unreal and the Unreal Real

Though the desire for power is the real motivation behind the actions of human beings, people and statesmen alike are often deceived by the moral constructs they create to help justify their actions. Recalling “Max Weber’s observation,” Morgenthau quotes Weber in support of the view that human beings are driven by self-interest: “Interests (material and ideal), not ideas, dominate directly the actions of men. Yet the ‘images of the world’ created by these ideas have very often served as switches determining the tracks on which the dynamism of interests kept actions moving.”

Moral systems, remember, are “morally pernicious” for Morgenthau because they are self-deceiving and, consequently, they prompt statesmen to commit all sorts of foolish and dangerous acts. At this point, we are right to ask, how can this be? How is that Morgenthau’s definition of human nature and politics, which he puts forth emphatically as “iron laws” equivalent to the law of gravitation in the natural world, operate without effect on the observable actions of statesman throughout history?

Put differently, how is it that a statesman’s “images of the world” (Weber) can override the “iron laws” of politics that presumably govern his or her actions? Morgenthau is aware of the tension between the dual “realities” of the “iron laws,” on the one hand, and of the world as it is understood and acted upon daily by statesmen everywhere, that is, in the world of conflicting moral views and political philosophies. In an effort to clarify his position, Morgenthau asks his reader to imagine the following situation:


324For examples of the several “iron laws” that comprise international relations for Morgenthau see Morgenthau, In Defense of the National Interest, 135, 144, 147, and 154.
Let us suppose for a moment that Lenin and Trotsky had died in exile, the unknown members of a Marxist sect, and that the Czar were still reigning over a Russia politically and technologically situated as it is today. Does anybody believe that it would be a matter of indifference for the United States to see Russian armies hardly more than a hundred miles from the Rhine, in the Balkans, with Russian influence holding sway over China and threatening to engulf the rest of Asia? Is anybody bold enough to assert that it would make all the difference in the world for the United States if Russian imperialism marched forward as it did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, under the ideological banner and with the support of Christianity rather than of Bolshevism?\textsuperscript{325}

Morgenthau suggests that a Czarist Russia at mid-twentieth century would behave the same as a Communist Soviet Union, all things (geography, military power, etc) being equal. So while most observers define the conflict as one between opposed political philosophies, in reality, most observers simply fail to scratch beneath the surface. But can this really be what Morgenthau has in mind? Are we to believe that the ideology of Soviet world communism plays absolutely no role in explaining its behavior on the world stage? Or, that Soviet communism in no way explains the differences between its actions and those of other historical great powers? Morgenthau seems to suggest as much and, by doing so, he seems to stretch his explanation of international politics beyond the realm of common sense - a standard to which he once appealed in an effort to refute the insanity of “dogmatic scientism.”

The answer to our befuddlement regarding the dual “realities” comes by way of a further counterintuitive ploy by Morgenthau. In his seminal work, \textit{Politics Among Nations}, he responds to the tension inherent in the dual “realities” of “power politics” and a statesman’s “images of the world:”

\textsuperscript{325}Morgenthau, \textit{Ibid.}, 77.
It is a characteristic aspect of all politics, domestic as well as international, that frequently its basic manifestations do not appear as what they actually are - manifestations of a struggle for power. Rather, the element of power as the immediate goal of the policy pursued is explained and justified in ethical, legal, or biological terms. That is to say: the true nature of the policy is concealed by ideological justifications and rationalizations...The actor on the political scene cannot help “playing an act” by concealing the true nature of his political actions behind the mask of political ideology. The more removed the individual is from a particular power struggle, the more likely he is to understand its true nature...On the other hand, politicians have an ineradicable tendency to deceive themselves about what they are doing by referring to their policies not in terms of power but in terms of either ethical and legal principles or biological necessities. In other words, while all politics is necessarily pursuit of power, ideologies render involvement in that contest for power psychologically and morally acceptable to the actors and their audience.326

The Will to Power and the Devolution of Realism into Idealism

Morgenthau’s use of counterintuitive ploys to explain the tension between his own version of the “Is” and the “Ought” dissolves his realism into a form of psychologism. Only by addressing squarely the question of human psychology is Morgenthau capable of resolving the tension between the “iron laws” of human nature and international politics and the way people and nations act on a daily basis. Since the “iron laws” are taken to be immutable, Morgenthau directs his efforts toward changing the values of his contemporaries in an effort to bring them in line with the primordial reality of the “power on power” conflict that defines international politics. Why must Morgenthau take such a dramatic course of action?

326Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 88-89.
The quick answer has to do with the danger of nuclear war. The tragic irony of the mid-twentieth century is that the combination of nuclear weapons and an unabashed embrace of the will to power would have catastrophic consequences. Some process or mechanism is therefore needed if the danger of nuclear war is to be averted. Though one might expect Morgenthau to place his faith in a concept like the balance of power in order to create an appropriate context for peace, he flatly rejects this approach. The balance of power is, for his purposes, too weak a concept on which to rely because of “how the power drives of nations take hold of ideal principles and transform them into ideologies in order to disguise, rationalize, and justify themselves. (Nations) have done this with the balance of power,” Morgenthau contends. The concept of the balance of power, then, is not only insufficient to bring about the peace necessary in the nuclear age but may, in fact, increase the likelihood of war. Some other process is needed. Morgenthau suggests as much in the following excerpt:

The confidence in the stability of the modern state system that emanates from all these deliberations and actions derives, it will be noted, not from the balance of power, but from a number of elements, intellectual and moral in nature, upon which the balance of power and stability of the modern system repose.

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327Ibid., 211.

328Balance of power logically results in war because each nation is given an incentive to increase their power vis-à-vis other nations. Once a nation obtains a certain level of power, it becomes imperative for it to consolidate that power. Morgenthau writes: “Since in a balance-of-power system all nations live in constant fear lest their rivals deprive them, at the first opportune moment, of their power position, all nations have a vital interest in anticipating such a development and doing to others what they do not want others to do unto them.” Balance of power, then, leads to war. “But, while nobody can tell how many wars there would have been without the balance of power, it is not hard to see that most of the wars that have been fought since the beginning of the modern state system have their origins in the balance of power.” See Morgenthau, Politics among nations, 208 & 210.

329Ibid., 217.
But what is the nature of those intellectual and moral elements that might make Morgenthau hopeful of peace in the nuclear age?

Because Morgenthau’s conception of human nature conflicts with his equally held belief in the “moral principle” of self-preservation, no mechanistic solution like the balance of power can produce lasting peace. Moreover, since “corruption is inherent in the very nature of the political act,” politics as currently constituted by the nation-state does not lend itself to the international collaboration necessary for world peace in the nuclear age. What is required is some kind of process that may mollify the harsher features of selfish and power hungry human beings. For Morgenthau, this amounts to a call for no less than a political and moral revolution.

A political and moral revolution is necessary because a policy of national preservation must be “the primary objective of foreign policy,” according to Morgenthau. However, the focus on preservation afforded by selfish and power hungry nations leaves the very survival of the nation at risk in the nuclear age. National survival is at risk because “in order to make one nation secure from nuclear destruction, (one) must make them all secure” and this requires a much broader perspective for Morgenthau. It is not enough for nations to meet the challenge of national preservation by autonomous measures alone. To the contrary, “for nations conscious of the potentialities of modern war, peace must be the

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330 Morgenthau, Politics among nations, 10.
331 Morgenthau, Scientific Man vs. Power Politics, 196.
goal of their foreign policies” and world government the consequence of their actions.\textsuperscript{333} This is the paradox of the modern age.

It is only when world politics have surrendered to a higher authority the means of destruction which modern technology has put into their hands – when they have given up their sovereignty – that international peace can be made as secure as domestic peace.\textsuperscript{334}

Politics must undergo a revolution because, otherwise, human beings in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century are likely to obliterate themselves. This insight goes to the core of Morgenthau’s realism: it represents a moral approach to foreign policy because it shows that the way to world peace lies through a political and moral revolution.\textsuperscript{335} Morgenthau’s realism makes a claim to being the true morality because it affords humanity its best chance at peace, something that idealism is tragically denied.\textsuperscript{336} It is, then, not wholly unlike idealism (though it comes presumably without the self-righteousness and hypocrisy that led to the latter’s logical collapse into perpetual war). But what exactly must happen for this true morality to see the

\textsuperscript{333}Quotes by Morgenthau found in Pangle and Ahrensdorf, \textit{Justice Among Nations}, 227.

\textsuperscript{334}Morgenthau, \textit{Politics Among Nations}, 547.

\textsuperscript{335}A distinction, at this point, must be made between political revolution and personal redemption for Morgenthau. Personal redemption is not sought here because of Morgenthau’s fervent belief, like Weber before him, in the moral soundness of Kant’s categorical imperative. Like Weber, Morgenthau believed that only a very few could live up to the stringent requirements of Kantian ethics. However, it was possible to conceive of some superlative individuals overcoming their primal desire for power and learning “to treat others not as means to other actor’s ends, but as ends in themselves.” With regards to politics, redemption of this kind was not possible for “corruption is inherent in the very nature of the political act.” Neither politics as currently constituted nor the circumscribed polities of Morgenthau’s proposed moral relativism allow for personal redemption. See Morgenthau, \textit{Scientific Man vs. Power Politics}, 196.

\textsuperscript{336}For support of this interpretation in realist literature, see Michael William’s “Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics,” \textit{International Organization} 58 (2004). Williams defends Morgenthau’s moral relativism is understood as a moral proposition as it helps limit the aims of politics and increases the chance for peaceful cooperation.
light of day? How can one hope to convince power hungry nations to pursue peace as “the(ir) primary objective of foreign policy?”

Morgenthau’s realism rests on its insight into the moral worth of moral relativism and the ability of the human intellect to will a different world. The intrinsic worth of moral relativism is found in its ability to increase tolerance for others. It is through increased tolerance that statesmen may lead their citizens away from the rigidity of moral certainty and toward a more profound appreciation for the national interest with the concomitant benefit of a more rational foreign policy. Moral relativism is, according to Morgenthau, “the precondition of a number of nations living side by side in mutual respect and peace.”337 But in order to accomplish the august goals of the true morality, human beings must renounce what is most dear to them: the belief that their “images of the world” (Weber) are correct and worth fighting for. This is no easy task. It requires no less than a revolution of thought, a complete “revaluation of all values.” Morgenthau hints at the magnitude of the challenge when he concludes:

Nor are the peoples of the world willing to do what is necessary to keep world government standing. For they are not prepared to perform that *revaluation of all values*, that unprecedented moral and political revolution, which would force the nation from its throne and put the political organization of humanity on it. They are willing and able to sacrifice and die so that national governments may be kept standing.338

Convincing statesmen of the moral rightness of moral relativism may be said to be one of the tasks assigned to the committed social or political scientist. Certainly one of the tasks

337Morgenthau, “National Interest and Moral Principles in Foreign Policy,” 211. Relativism is also the basis to democracy. Morgenthau refers often to the “relativistic ethos of democracy.” See Morgenthau, *Truth and Power*, 44.

that Morgenthau sets himself is to convince statesmen that nationalism is incompatible with the world peace needed in the nuclear age. The “nationalistic masses,” according to Morgenthau, are ignorant of the tragic consequences of their beliefs. They mistakenly understand nationalism as redemptive of life in this world but “little do they know that they meet under an empty sky from which the gods have departed.” Their ignorance cannot go unchecked in the nuclear age. Since statesmen themselves are blinded by their “images of the world,” it is incumbent upon political scientists like Morgenthau to convince them of the bleakness of their citizen’s aspirations in order to better serve humanity’s true interests. And yet, as it was in the case of Weber’s sociology, the contradictions in Morgenthau’s thought rob him of a theoretical foundation to justify such a damning and counterintuitive conclusion. Robbed of theory, Morgenthau is guilty, like Weber and “dogmatic scientism” generally, of “superimposing upon a recalcitrant reality a theoretical scheme that satisfies the desire for thorough rationalization,” or, more precisely, of superimposing a scheme that satisfies what can only be called a personal aspiration or will for world peace. Morgenthau relies on the strength of his will to convince his students of the salubriousness

339Ibid., 256.

340There are passages to which we might point in Morgenthau’s writings that hint at a need for relying on a statesman’s common sense or intuition. For instance, he writes that “the statesman is indeed the prototype of social man himself; for what the statesman experiences on his exalted plane is the common lot of all mankind.” Yet on the same page, he tells us that the statesman “creates a new society out of his knowledge of man.” In this, Morgenthau sounds very much like Kissinger in maintaining the belief that a statesman can be gifted enough to take what he knows about human beings and create a better society or a reality that exists only in his mind’s eye. This type of intuition (if this is indeed the best word for such a creative force) is by no means to be confused with the common sense of the average person or average statesman. It is rather a gift held by the very few and learned according to Morgenthau. Quotes come from Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 221.

of his convictions regardless of how unrealistic (i.e. detached from how the world is seen and acted upon by people everyday) those convictions happen to be.\textsuperscript{342}

In one final counterintuitive ploy to support his quest for peace, Morgenthau goes on to argue that theory is not really about refining one’s explanatory and predictive capabilities. Instead, theory’s real purpose is prescriptive - to proffer solutions to humanity’s tragic existence - and represents at its finest an elegant expression of human will, that is, the will of the political scientist who understands the real purpose of international relations theory. In \textit{Truth and Power}, he articulates this understanding of theory:

Thus the intellectual possibility of a theory of international relations depended upon the recognition that the relations among nations are not something which is given to man, which he has to accept as given, and which he must cope with as best he can; rather, it is that the relations among nations have been created by the \textit{will of man} and therefore can be manipulated and changed and reformed by the \textit{will of man}.\textsuperscript{343}

\textsuperscript{342}This conclusion is not one that is shared by the many IR theorists. For an example, see Robert Jervis, “Hans Morgenthau, Realism, and the Scientific Study of Politics.” Jervis argues that what the contradictions in Morgenthau’s thought “make inadvertently clear is that it is difficult to develop an argument that both explains and prescribes.” Jervis seems prepared to wash over these contradictions, concluding that it simply places Morgenthau “at odds with the stereotype of Realism” and nothing more. My argument is clearly at odds with this more charitable conclusion. The challenge for Jervis and others who favor this interpretation is to explain the value of the scientific study of politics in Morgenthau’s method. Is it meant as some kind of rhetorical devise - an appeal to modern sensibilities? Or, is it meant to be a rigorously propositional and descriptive approach from which predictions and prescriptions logically follow? That is, is it meant to be scientific according to the most generally accepted definition of science? If it is the former, if it is meant to be simply rhetorical, then one may ask, why bother? Why not simply rely on the descriptive narrative of the historian, that common sense approach to describing political events which allows one to glean the lessons afforded by prudence or wisdom? Both can lead to prescription, though the latter does so in a more straightforward manner.

\textsuperscript{343}Morgenthau, \textit{Truth and Power}, 253. Italics mine. For Morgenthau, an undue reliance on description of the way things actually are is why philosophy and history were indistinguishable “until the end of the Napoleonic Wars.” It is only with the arrival of modern theory, specifically, Morgenthau’s weberian influenced realism, that this merely descriptive aspect of theory could at last be overcome.
Neoconservatism, Common Sense, and Moderation

I began this section by claiming that there was a gap in our understanding of neoconservatism. The gap had to do with the differences in conceptual logic between neoconservatism and modern social and political theory. These differences were only hinted at or partially gleaned in the first two chapters, because, until now, our study of neoconservatism dealt with practical policy issues like nuclear deterrence and détente. What was gleaned in those two chapters, however, suggested that indeed neoconservatives proceeded from a very different philosophical (or theoretical) and epistemological basis than did the proponents of MAD theory, arms control and détente with the Soviet Union. In an effort to move beyond the surface it was necessary to conduct a careful review of the philosophical (or theoretical) and epistemological basis to modern positivistic social science and mainstream international relations theory. This, I suggested, would provide a broader perspective regarding the neoconservative approach to international politics and contrast it meaningfully against the approach favored by modern realism. Moreover, I suggested that Leo Strauss’s critique of Max Weber was relevant in this regard because Strauss, who had an enormous influence on Irving Kristol, was the first to flesh out the logical consequences of modern social science. On the basis of his critique, I further suggested, we might find ourselves better equipped to understand the importance of neoconservatism in the context of modern international relations theory, with Hans Morgenthau as our representative at mid-twentieth century.

The analysis of Strauss’ critique of Weber, together with the analysis of the theoretical writings of Hans Morgenthau, permits a few definitive conclusions regarding neoconservatism. Strauss’ critique of Weber demonstrates the relativistic and nihilistic
implications to a theoretical understanding founded on the fact/value distinction. Though Weber was willing to run the risk of nihilism because of his desire to create a truly scientific social science, in the end, the fact/value distinction undermined his objective of creating a value-neutral and objective social science by stealing away reasonable support for any values, cultural or scientific. As a result, all of Weber's talk about struggle, conflict, power politics and the tragedy of human life proved to have no foundation or logical support in his theoretical arguments. Rather, as Strauss makes clear, these claims were the result of Weber’s upbringing, personal aspiration, and will.

The argument that weberian social science is supported by no more than the will of its chief architect means that the mantle of authority claimed by social scientists over more traditional approaches to the study of society and politics must be reconsidered. Furthermore, by way of our analysis of the logical consequences to the theoretical writings of Hans Morgenthau, we are led to a comparable conclusion: that Morgenthau’s realism is no more real than more traditional approaches to the study of international politics. In fact, given his belief that theory is merely the perfect expression of the human will, we are right to argue that his realism is decidedly less real. We are struck, then, by the relevance of Strauss’ critique of Weber to the whole of modern social and political theory at mid-twentieth century. The connective tissue between Weber and Morgenthau is that both theorists were willing to run the risk of relativism and nihilism in the hope of achieving their personal aspirations. For Weber, moral relativism opened up an opportunity for a tragic conception of life that would save humanity from the fate of Nietzsche’s ‘last man’ - that terribly bland and dispassionate figure that is a consequence of bourgeois society; for Morgenthau, relativism offered humanity the chance to avoid the dire consequences of nuclear war and to stake a claim for world peace.
The writings of Weber and Morgenthau also bring to light some of the earliest examples of the counterintuitive ploys and heightened abstraction that would come to define much of modern theory in the 20th Century, from economics to strategic thought to international relations theory. Reliance on such ploys has at least two consequences that are worth noting. One consequence has to do with what seems like an unabashed violation of the standard of common sense. This is to say that some of the conclusions by theorists like Weber, Morgenthau and, as I argue in the next chapter, Kenneth Waltz, regarding the way human beings understand and act upon the world can sometimes reach farcical levels which seem to scream out for an appeal before the jury of common sense. Whether it is Weber’s refusal to distinguish between a competent general or a blundering one, Morgenthau’s claim that there would be no meaningful differences between the foreign policies of the Soviet Union and Czarist Russia, or Waltz’s advocacy for the measured proliferation of nuclear weapons,344 each of these theorists seem to get so caught up in the intellectual acrobatics of their craft that they fail to judge the soundness of their conclusions against the standard of common sense. These counterintuitive ploys follow directly from their theoretical approach and thus Strauss’ concern that “prudence is always endangered by false doctrines,” “by false theoretical opinions” and that, therefore, “it is always in need of defense against such opinions,” must be thoughtfully considered.

Neoconservatism’s reliance on common sense, on those pre-scientific, moral and political opinions available to unassisted reason and which do not require special knowledge or the reliance on counterintuitive ploys, stands in stark contrast to the writings of Weber and Morgenthau. The visible differences between these two approaches, however, are not

344See Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better.”
enough to protect common sense from attack. For this, as Strauss warns, a theoretical defense is necessary. I suggested above that Strauss provides this defense and for this reason, among others, Strauss’ critique of Weber and the new political science is especially useful in helping students of international relations theory grasp the philosophical and epistemological differences between modern social and political theory and a more traditional reliance on common sense.

A second consequence to the counterintuitive ploys and heightened abstraction of theorists like Weber, Morgenthau and Waltz is that their conclusions are often so far-fetched for neoconservatives that they maintain little relevance for actual statesmen (with the notable exception of Henry Kissinger). For neoconservatives like Irving Kristol, this was an especially troublesome feature common to contemporary intellectuals and their opinions on foreign policy. Kristol understood that foreign policy was “peculiarly susceptible to galloping abstractions” and, in his opinion, most intellectuals chose to inflate such abstractions rather than “moderate or puncture” them. Writing on the behavior of intellectuals in the late 1960s, Kristol observes:

Abstractions are their life’s blood, and even when they resolutely decide to become “tough-minded” they end up with an oversimplified ideology of Realpolitik that is quite useless as a guide to the conduct of foreign affairs and leads its expounders to one self-contradiction after another. But the important point is not that intellectuals are always wrong on matters of foreign policy – they are not, and could not possibly be, if only by the laws of chance. What is striking is that, right or wrong, they are so often, from the statesman’s point of view, irrelevant. And it is their self-definition as ideological creatures that makes them so.\(^{345}\)

“What this adds up to is that ideology can obtain exasperatingly little purchase over the realities of foreign policy.” Because foreign policy is an “amorphous” concept for Kristol, he favors a more prudential and expedient approach that begins and ends with the perspective of the statesman. Quite self-consciously, then, Kristol argues that the ideology of contemporary intellectuals stands in contrast to the prudence required by statesmen. Yet prudence for Kristol, as it is for Strauss, is possible only as a result of a non-ideological approach to the study of foreign affairs. Singling out Hans Morgenthau for special criticism, he argues that intellectuals as a group are prone to extremism, priding themselves on their “transcendentalist populism” or, to borrow a phrase from Morgenthau, their “prophetic confrontation” with their government. Intellectuals thus lack the one thing needful in politics for Kristol, prudence. And, as I have argued throughout this chapter, the theories of these intellectuals lack the very means necessary for the cultivation of prudence, that is, a fundamental respect for, and reliance on, common sense.

346Ibid., 78, 79, 83.
It would be misleading to students of international relations if our comparative analysis of neoconservatism were left to a review of positivistic social and political science in the twentieth century. It would be misleading because most contemporary IR theorists have made a conscious effort to distance themselves and their theories from the limits imposed by logical positivism, in particular, its conception of reality as an unproblematic “fact” provided by nature. This distancing is most apparent in the epistemological writings of Kenneth Waltz where a very different theory of knowledge is presented, one that is best characterized as post-, or neo-, positivistic. Beginning with his seminal work on international relations, *Man, the State and War*, Waltz has enjoyed considerable influence for decades. He is the chief architect of neorealism which, together with its intellectual sibling, neoliberalism, dominates the intellectual landscape of the field today. Both intellectual traditions share a common neopositive epistemology and their presence in the field invites us to continue our

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348 Tellingly, scholars from these two intellectual camps routinely comprise the list of the most influential thinkers in the field. In a recent poll by *Foreign Policy* magazine listing the 25 most influential thinkers over the last twenty years in foreign affairs, the top five included Robert Keohane, Kenneth Waltz & John Mearsheimer, with Keohane’s once co-author and neoliberal colleague, Joseph Nye, coming in at number six. One critical theorist, Alexander Wendt cracked the top 10 and one neoconservative, Francis Fukuyama, cracked the top 20. See “The Most Influential Scholars,” *Foreign Policy*, November/December, 2005, 62. My emphasis on the obvious dominance of neorealism and neoliberalism is not meant to ignore the important contributions of critical theorists like Wendt and neo-marxists like Richard Ashley.
comparative analysis. The contributions by Waltz will serve as the primary focus of this chapter though, in making the argument that there exists an important and wide conceptual gulf that separates neoconservatism from neorealism, I will make frequent reference to a diverse set of theorists including Robert Jervis, Alexander Wendt, John Mearsheimer, Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye and Richard Ashley in an effort to place neoconservatism in the context of contemporary IR theory as a whole.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate that despite the best efforts of neorealists to address the shortcomings of positivism and the logical inconsistencies of modern realism, they end up very much in the same place. In the writings of Kenneth Waltz, we find a conceptual framework that is, like the fact/value approach advocated by Weber and adopted by Morgenthau, logically reducible to the personal aspiration or will of the theorist. I suggest that Waltz’s neopositivism can support no other outcome, given his embrace of an even more radical form of relativism than positivism. For all of Waltz’s rigorously propositional logic, the reader is left with a theory of international relations that is at once undermined by his epistemology and internally inconsistent. It thus fails to provide the desired explanatory and predictive value of a science of international relations. Students of international relations are, I suggest, left with no more than the personal opinions of an astute political observer. What they do not have is a consistent and logical framework upon which to base these political opinions. In contrast, neoconservatism relies on a conceptual framework the basis for which is common sense, grounded in a political and moral language that does not require initiation into a specialized vocabulary or a counterintuitive and relativistic epistemology. The conceptual logic of neoconservatism, as suggested in the previous chapter, is thus one to which statesmen and politicians can more easily relate. This provides
I suggest that Kenneth Waltz puts forth a neopositive epistemology that is shared by most theorists in the field of contemporary international relations including neoliberals, critical theorists, post-modernists, and neo-marxists. Waltz’s epistemology puts forth the belief that reality is a construct of shared ideas rather than inherent in the nature of things. A consequence of this belief is a form of relativism that is markedly more extreme than Weber’s positivism. It is also markedly detached from what Alexander Wendt refers to as the “common sense realism” of the classical realists.\footnote{Alexander Wendt, \textit{Social Theory of International Relations} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52.} Waltz’s epistemology, because of its relativism, calls into question the very possibility of theory and method and, as a result, robs him of a conceptual framework that satisfies his ambition for a predictive and explanatory science of international relations. However, and somewhat inconsistently, Waltz puts forth a theory of international relations that is illustrative of a common sense understanding of the world. The apparent contradiction in Waltz’s thinking not only creates confusion for the reader but also highlights the almost compulsory need for taking the world as it appears to the average person – a world filled with states and, for Waltz, a world of states that operate in a system of anarchy. As Wendt suggests in his own critique of Waltz, such a common sense understanding (he calls it positivistic) of the world implies a materialist conception of reality. This has the effect of placing Waltz’s conception of the world at odds, and divorced from, his idealistic and neopositive epistemology.\footnote{Wendt, 5. Wendt provides a succinct summary of the differences between neorealists, neoliberals, and constructivists: “Neorealists see the structure of the international system as a distribution of material capabilities because they approach their subject with a material lens; Neoliberals see it as capabilities plus institutions because they have added}
Given the tension between Waltz’s epistemology, put forth most comprehensively in his 1979 work, *Theory of International Politics*, and the materialist theory of international relations that he argues for in *Man, the State and War*, the reader is right to ask to what extent is his understanding of international relations a function of his own personal views? Because the assumptions that make up Waltz’s theory of international relations - the belief in the rationality of states, their desire for security and the anarchy of the international system – do not follow from his carefully detailed epistemology, I conclude that Waltz lacks a philosophical basis for many of his opinions. This has the effect of reducing much of his thought to mere will or personal aspiration. Moreover, I suggest that because of the absence of a philosophical basis to his theory, together with the fact that his epistemology undermines the very possibility of theory and method, Waltz’s writing can often appear detached from the constraints imposed by common sense. This detachment enables him to make what can only be characterized as unrealistic assumptions about human and state behavior which, in turn, lead him to questionable public policy recommendations. In the final analysis, Waltz’s theory of international relations results in a series of abstractions that fail to resonate with the perspective of the world held by the average policy maker or statesman.

On a larger note, this chapter seeks to contextualize the decision made by neorealists, neoliberals, critical theorists and neomarxists to distance themselves from the wreckage of logical positivism in the 1960s. Their respective choices were an effort to address the logical inconsistencies of modern realism and its apparent lack of analytical rigor. One consequence of these efforts has been to remove the study of international relations from its historical...
audience, statesmen, and hand it over to scholars whose deepening quest for methodological refinement forces the uninitiated to abandon ship. In the previous chapter, we saw how Irving Kristol characterized the “abstractions” of IR theorists as “oversimplified” and “from the statesman’s point of view, irrelevant.” Through my analysis of Waltz, I hope to provide evidence that, in an effort to overcome irrelevance, contemporary IR theory has been forced to rely on the persuasiveness of its personalities and on a conceptual framework that has hardened into dogma. Understanding this development is crucial with regards to our efforts in the next, and final, chapter where we come to terms with neoconservatism’s influence on the Bush Administration and the latter’s decision to attack Iraq—a decision that occurred against the backdrop of passionate and near unanimous opposition by realists.

Neopositivism and the Rejection of Positivistic Social and Political Theory

Neoliberals and neorealists share a common belief in the possibility of structural theory and in the need for a rigorous methodology to bring meaning to international politics. They also share several fundamental assumptions about the world. Both neorealists and neoliberals understand the international system to be defined by anarchy and a state’s paramount concern to be its survival. Furthermore, they believe that logical positivism represents a failed epistemology and that a more nuanced, neopositivistic epistemology is needed, one that incorporates a belief in a theory-laden reality and endeavors to satisfy the promise of an explanatory and predictive social science.


352 Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics*. Keohane refers to the post-positivistic commitment to Lakatos’ criteria of appraisal as “neopositivism.”
Neopositivism is the result of a generational critique of the basic assumptions of logical positivism regarding truth and science, at the center of which is Thomas Kuhn's charge that normal science is logically encapsulated in a series of dominant paradigms throughout history. According to Kuhn, these dominant paradigms do not merely dominate thought but, rather, they tyrannize thought into accepting a particular mode of processing and understanding natural phenomena. Moving from one scientific paradigm to another is not a function of rational debate, he argued, but rather a function of scientific revolution, a process that lies beyond the textbook conception of what constitutes the scientific method. The brunt of Kuhn's criticism focuses on positivism's reliance on the Humean notion of a “fact” as an unproblematic equivalent to sense impression and the requirement that truth possess either a definitional (i.e. analytical or “language of science”) or observable quality. (All other statements of either a non-analytical or non-observable quality were considered “cognitively meaningless” by positivists and dismissed as “nonsense.”) Kuhn argued that this definition of science was impoverished and ultimately self-defeating. When it came to theory creation, for Kuhn, the real world of science making simply did not resemble the picture painted by positivism.

Critiques of this kind by Kuhn, Strauss, and the historicists meant that by the 1950s “positivism was virtually dead as a philosophical movement.” In reaction to the death of

353 Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962)
354 Putnam, 18. The quote is from Rudolf Carnap who defines “nonsense” as statements that “do not possess a certain logical characteristic common to all proper scientific statements.” Carnap was a member of the Vienna Circle and this definition of logical positivism mirrors the Circle's consensus view, a view that has influenced the social sciences enormously. For a brilliant overview of logical positivism and its limitations from the standpoint of a philosopher of science, see Hilary Putnam, Chapter 1.
positivism the social sciences moved in the direction of what David Easton called a “post-behavioral revolution.” This post-behavioral revolution was founded on a fresh epistemology that borrowed heavily from Kuhn and the historicists. It understood the world less as a given – there to be analyzed by the passive observer – and more a product of the \textit{a priori} theoretical constructs that the observer brought to bear on the phenomenal world. The epistemological objective of what became known as neopositivism was to salvage claims to truth and science from the wreckage of positivism. As part of this larger effort, neopositivism came to understand “theories (to be) made of sterner stuff, and facts (to be) not so hard and unyielding as classical empiricists had supposed.” In short, the hope was for more flexible and increasingly explanatory theories.

The rejection of positivism became, over time, a rite of passage for IR theorists of every intellectual stripe and, in turn, positivism became a term of abuse. Waltz, for example, accuses his neoliberal opponents of adhering to a “moderate version” of positivism. He claims that because Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye “argue that complex interdependence sometimes comes closer to reality than does realism” they therefore must believe “that theory does little more than mirror reality” - a basic tenet of positivism. As a result of their intellectual heritage, Waltz finds their theories to be fundamentally weakened. Yet his assertion is difficult to square with Keohane’s account of his own acceptance of systemic or

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\end{footnotes}
structural theory. Keohane endorses systemic theory because it satisfies the “requirements for scientific knowledge of neopositivist philosophers of science such as Lakatos.”

Coming full circle, Richard Ashley, a self-proclaimed neopositivist and neomarxist, perceives neorealism to be trapped forever in the mold of positivism. “Neorealist theory,” he writes, “is the theory of, by, and for positivists.”

Alexander Wendt also interprets neorealism and neoliberalism as tethered more closely to positivism than either camp might comfortably admit. Given the emphasis on power and interest, Wendt argues that neorealists and neoliberals possess a materialist and individualist view of the world that sets it apart from the idealist epistemology of neopositivism.

A shared point of purchase for Waltz, Keohane and Ashley, however, is the acceptance of Imre Lakatos’ theory of research programmes and, along with it, the dialectical character of theory construction that formed the basis of Lakatos’ epistemology. Lakatos, a gifted mathematician and a student of Karl Popper’s, provided epistemological and methodological support for moving beyond logical positivism and the Popperian standard of what Lakatos referred to as “dogmatic” or “naïve falsification.” Whereas Popper understood the facts of the observable world to be the standard by which theories should be judged, for Lakatos, this understanding rested on a “naturalistic doctrine of observation.” Lakatos rejected this doctrine because, for him, “there are and can be no sensations

359Robert O. Keohane, ed., Neorealism and its Critics, 197. It is also interesting to note that in two volumes dealing with neorealism (the above referenced Keohane, ed. and David Baldwin, ed., Neorealism and Neoliberalism (New York: Columbia, 1993), the question of methodology is dealt with only sparingly by neoliberal critics and substantively only by Richard Ashley, a self-claimed positivistic and neomarxist. In fact, in the opening pages of Baldwin, ed., David Baldwin writes that unlike the previous volume “the contributors to this one share many fundamental assumptions about the nature and purpose of social scientific inquiry” (3). This seems to imply broad based methodological agreement. Keohane, it should noted, contributes articles to both volumes.


361Alexander Wendt, see chapter 1, “Four sociologies of international politics”, 1-42.
unimpregnated by expectation and therefore there is no natural (i.e. psychological) demarcation between observational and theoretical propositions.” 362 The communion between observer and observed is an intimate one for Lakatos and too heavy a reliance on empiricism makes theory creation an impossible task.

What Lakatos meant by “no sensations unimpregnated by expectation” becomes clearer once we understand his response to the intellectually fertile period of mid-twentieth century thought. As the edifice of positivism was slowly being dismantled, first, by its own internal contradictions, and then by a series of independent attacks by Kuhn, Strauss, and the historicists, the question of demarcation - of distinguishing between true science and pseudo-science - remained. If positivism failed to define the demarcation clearly enough, this did not mean that such a point did not exist. The intellectual current at mid-century presented mathematicians like Lakatos with a sense of urgency in coming up with a philosophy of science that was sensitive to how scientific advancement actually occurred in history. Otherwise, the integrity of science was jeopardized by Kuhn’s emphasis on science as dogma or the elitism of Popper (the view that true science is something that can be determined only by experienced scientists).

By being more sensitive to the actual process of theory making, Lakatos believed that science might ascertain relevant insights into the foundation of knowledge itself. Positivism’s view of science presented too formal a definition to the demarcation problem and, as such, it presented a distorted picture of how theories in normal science come about. For Lakatos, positivism was hard on logic and short on the back and forth quality of real

scientists wrestling with an intellectual problem. The picture painted over the years by positivism was one that accentuated a clean analytical process of observation, hypothesis and theory. For Lakatos, like Kuhn, this was a myth; unlike Kuhn, however, he sought to learn from the way theories were actually made in order to preserve the reasonableness of science and respond forcefully to the demarcation question.

Lakatos ultimately rejected what he identified as positivism’s formalism because it separated the production of conjecture from its evaluation. While the latter was seen as a rational process, the former, for positivists, was something better left to psychologists and sociologists. By placing production of conjecture within the realm of psychology, science’s treatment of its own basis became stale and unrealistic. This exposed science to Kuhn’s criticism that it had adopted an uncritical stance toward the operative and dominant paradigms of thought in any given historical period. More critically, positivism left science exposed to the charge by unrepentant historicists that all thought was fundamentally arbitrary. Yet, for Lakatos, the history of science provided important clues that answered the demarcation problem and made it possible to understand the dialectical process of scientific discovery without lapsing into mysticism or psychologism.

Lakatos’ efforts were especially important because, at mid-twentieth century, as positivism withered, historicism blossomed. Without a reasonable justification for science that was both historically accurate and logically defensible, scientific change, as Lakatos observed of the Kuhnian thesis, amounted to nothing more than a “mystical conversion...
which (was) not and (could) not be governed by rules of reason and which falls totally within the realm of the (social) psychology of discovery.\textsuperscript{363}

Lakatos’ defense of a true science began with a reading of history that predated the ascendancy of logic and modern mathematics to reveal a much messier process of conjecture and revision. In his seminal work, \textit{Proof and Refutations}, Lakatos reviewed for illustrative purposes the historical development of Euler’s formula. The fictional students introduced by Lakatos make mathematical arguments using the concept of the polyhedron. In the process, the concept is improved upon through a dialectical process, the back and forth that defines actual debate. Change to the concept of what a polyhedron is does not follow the purified vision of an analytical argument; rather, students randomly introduce new geometrical objects with suddenness and élan. These new kinds of objects force the students to develop the concept of the polyhedron on an ad hoc basis, that is, in response to conjectures that are not logically inferred from some concept previously stated. What starts out, then, as a mathematical investigation becomes a study in the art of discovery, an essay on dialectics the purpose of which is to demonstrate philosophically how concepts mutate through debate. Presented by positivists, however, such debates, according to Lakatos, are covered over by a fantastical vision of mathematical logic divorced from reality.\textsuperscript{364}

From his understanding of how actual science is conducted, Lakatos sought a way to break the grip of falsificationism, the belief popularized by Popper that all theories can be shown to be false. At a certain level of generality, Lakatos shared Popper’s belief that all


\textsuperscript{364}This synopsis of the polyhedron example comes from Larvor, 12-14; for a thorough review of Lakatos’s understanding of history, see Gabor Forrai, “Lakatos, Reason and History” in George Kampis, Ladislav Kvasz, and Michael Stoltzner, eds., \textit{Appraising Lakatos: Mathematics, Methodology and the Man} (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 75-83.
theories were tentative endeavors and could forever be improved. Where he broke with Popper was on the belief that the role of criticism was “not simply to confront (a given) theory with recalcitrant phenomena. Rather it was to force a shift to a new conceptual framework, in search of deeper theorems or proofs.”365 In an effort to mollify the harsher edges of Popper’s falsificationism, and yet to retain its emphasis on criticism, Lakatos called his approach to theory making the “methodology of scientific research programs.” It represented a turn toward a more dynamic approach to theory construction and a significant departure away from the parsimoniousness of logical positivism.

The methodology of research programmes presents a very different picture of the game of science from the picture of the methodological falsificationist. The best opening gambit is not a falsifiable (and therefore consistent) hypothesis, but a research programme. Mere ‘falsification’ (in Popper’s sense) must not imply rejection. Mere ‘falsification’ (that is, anomalies) are to be recorded but need not be acted upon. Popper’s great negative crucial experiments disappear; ‘crucial experiment’ is an honorific title, which may, of course, be conferred on certain anomalies, but only long after the event, only when one programme has to be defeated by another one.366

On Waltz’s and Neorealism

In the epistemological and methodological writings of Kenneth Waltz one finds one of the most articulate and nuanced presentation of international relations theory today.367 Waltz’s approach to theory picks up on the criticisms of logical positivism by Kuhn and the

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365Larvor, 30.


historicists over the years. But the single largest influence on his understanding of theory and method comes by way of Lakatos, who provides Waltz with an awareness of the limitations to logical positivism’s definition of truth and science and pushes him to move theory beyond what Waltz calls the “barren hypothetico-deductive” approach of the positivist.\(^{368}\) In the process, however, Waltz radicalizes Lakatos’ thought by rejecting the very concept of truth itself.

For neopositivists like Waltz, reality is incomprehensible absent the filtering lens of theory. “Data never speak for themselves,” Waltz writes, “what we think of reality is itself an elaborate conception constructed and reconstructed through the ages.”\(^{369}\) This makes theory construction at once essential - for without which nothing meaningful can be said about the infinite phenomena surrounding us - and yet slippery and difficult to accomplish. Theory is not an easy thing because it is neither intimately bound to the observable world nor is it the child of induction, logically following from facts or the discovery of certain laws of behavior.\(^{370}\) “A theory, though related to the world about which explanations are wanted, always remains distinct from that world. ‘Reality’ will be congruent neither with a theory nor with a model that may represent it.”\(^{371}\) Since “nothing is ever both empirically and absolutely true” for Waltz, it follows that theory is not meant to represent truth in the positivistic sense of the term as that which is certain or without falseness. “If we could apprehend the world that interests us,” Waltz writes, “we would have no need for theory.” Rather, theory is

\(^{368}\)Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 11.

\(^{369}\)Ibid. 4, 5.

\(^{370}\)Waltz is critical of those who seem to think that theories are created all the time, effortless following from a dominant paradigm. See Waltz, “Evaluating Theories,” and his criticism of Vasquez and the latter’s belief that “paradigms easily generate a family of theories,” 913.

understood to be like “a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity.”372 Theories are purely nomological in this regard; they are constructs of the mind that must be measured in terms of their utility and not in terms of their mirror-like reflection of reality. Theory rests at the top of Waltz’s hierarchy of thought. It is architectonic in stature, and it stands above observable laws like those of Newtonian mechanics because it gives meaning to such laws of behavior.

Despite, or perhaps because of the fact that theory is untethered from reality as conceived by positivists (and, for that matter, the average person), “theory has explanatory and predictive value” for Waltz. But “what do(es) (Waltz) mean by explain?” The answer he provides is by no means intuitive. Waltz defines explanation as a “range of outcomes” or “patterns” that “fall within certain limits;” these outcomes and patterns ultimately “repeat themselves” and include “events that none or few of the actors may like.” Theories, therefore, help explain “big, important, and enduring patterns.” However, he cautions, they are “no good on detail.” A theory of international relations, for example, “will not predict the outbreak of particular wars.”373 While prediction is by definition about an event that has yet to occur and, therefore, we may cut Waltz some slack when he restricts a theory’s predictive value to that of “enduring patterns”, he does not stop there: theories do not even do a very good job of explaining historical events - like shifts in the balance of powers - because, to repeat, they are “no good on detail.”

372Ibid., 8, 5.
373Ibid., 68-69.
Explanation, Prediction & Waltz’s Neopositivism

Waltz’s definition of theory quickly leads him into a practical and epistemological quandary. Practically speaking, Waltz, like Lakatos before him, is challenged to meaningfully limit the potentially infinite “range of outcomes.” Theory must be measured by its ability to explain a shared historical experience within some reasonable timeframe. An absence of limits would leave the application of theory so open ended as to be meaningless. Waltz indicates that he agrees with this standard and yet the limits he applies are often hazy and hard to discern. Take, for example, Waltz’s defense of his balance of power theory against the contradictory evidence of the 1930s when European countries failed to balance the growing threat of Hitler’s Germany. John Vasquez, a critic of neorealism, puts to Waltz a rather straightforward question: “does the observation made correspond with a theory’s prediction?” That is, do the events of the 1930s prove or disprove the theory of the balance of power? For Waltz, the question is too rooted in positivism and ignores the subtleties of a theory’s relevance. Having rejected the concept of falsification employed by positivists, he comments that “testing theories is an uncertain business” and “what is to be taken as evidence for or against a theory is always in question.” In direct response to Vasquez’s criticism, he concludes that “whether or not events in the 1930s tend to validate or to falsify my version of balance-of-power theory depends as much on how one interprets the theory as on what happened.”

Waltz seems to suggest that with further refinement of the testing process, his theory may fit the historical experience - albeit over a longer time frame and not

374Waltz, “Evaluating Theories,” 916; Waltz asks, “should delay in completing a balance be taken as evidence contradicting balance-of-power theory? One may not be able to answer the question decisively. In this case, however, one should certainly remember that the theory being tested explains the process of balancing as well as predicting that balances recurrently form. The theory cannot say how long the process will take.” The balance ultimately occurred in the 1940s.
necessarily when demanded by political circumstance (i.e. by France, Britain and other European states in the 1930s to prevent Germany’s expansionary rise). Waltz thus lengthens the timeframe for judging the relevance and application of his balance of power theory and, in the process, grants himself such a liberal margin of error that theory testing is seemingly reduced to a subjective, not to say intuitive, evaluation of the outside world.

At this point, the reader may have lost confidence in the balance of power’s ability to explain why certain events happened the way they did. Waltz reminds his readers, once more, that theories are not meant to explain specifics; “a theory does not provide an account of what has happened or of what may happen.” He continues:

However good or bad my brief explanation of what happened in Europe prior to World War II may be (Waltz 1979, 164-70), an explanation is not a theory. A theory does not provide an account of what has happened or of what may happen. Just as a hammer becomes a useful tool when nails and wood are available, so a theory becomes useful in devising an explanation of events when combined with information about them. 375

Is a student of international relations meant to interpret this to mean that only when the specifics of an historical event are known, can a theory tell us why it happened? If this is the case, then a student may rightfully ask, does Waltz’s theory explain what happened any better than a historian’s traditional narrative? Moving on for the moment, surely Waltz would agree that the real test of whether students of international relations should take Waltz’s theorizing seriously resides in theory’s ability to predict future occurrences. While everyone - the historian, the theorist, the statesman - can try to explain what happened after the specifics are known, predicting the future has to be the real test. Yet in the absence of a

375 Ibid.
rigorous definition to the “range of outcomes” and their “limits” or timeframe, Waltz backpedals from earlier statements that the “usefulness” of theory be “judged by the explanatory and predictive power” it affords. 376

A theory's ability to explain is more important than its ability to predict. At least Steven Weinberg and many others think so. Believing that scientists will one day come up with a final theory, he writes that even then we will not be able "to predict everything or even very much," but, he adds, we will be able to understand why things "work the way they do" (1992, 45; cf. Toulmin 1961, 36-8). Success in explaining, not in predicting, is the ultimate criterion of good theory. Theories of evolution, after all, predict nothing in particular. 377

The beauty of logical positivism, and what helps explain its lure for social scientists over the years, was the inductive ease with which a theorist might move from laws to the construct of a general theory. For Waltz, and neopositivists generally, this vision of theory is outmoded. The “inductivist route” is discredited by the belief that “reality” is unknowable without an existing theoretical structure through which phenomena are interpreted. 378 “To claim that it is possible to arrive at a theory inductively is to claim that we can understand phenomena before the means for the explanation are contrived.” And if this were the case, recall, “we would have no need for theory,” 379 according to Waltz.

376Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 8.
378Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 4.
379Ibid., 5.
But, epistemologically speaking, this presents a student of neopositivism with a classic paradox: if reality comes to the student already theory-laden, and if theories are neither inferred from laws nor inferred from facts as such, how does the student acquire the knowledge to construct a theory in the first place? “Knowledge, it seems, must precede theory, and yet knowledge can proceed only from theory.”

Waltz cautions his reader not to take this problem too “seriously” because to do so “one is literally driven to despair.” “Take it instead,” he suggests, “as a statement of the strategic problem of gaining knowledge, and no more is suggested than the difficulties in any field of getting onto an intellectual track that promises to lead to some progress.”

Theories must be measured by their “usefulness” and “usefulness is judged by the explanatory and predictive power of the theory that may be fashioned.” He tells us elsewhere that assumptions may be “brazenly false” because truth is not the objective:

In making assumptions about men’s (or state’s) motivations, the world must be drastically simplified; subtleties must be rudely pushed aside, and reality must be grossly distorted. Descriptions strive for accuracy; assumptions are brazenly false. The assumptions on which theories are built are radical simplifications of the world and are useful only because they are such. Any radical simplification conveys a false impression of the world.

“If ‘truth’ is the question, then we are in the realm of laws, not theory.” Theories can be said to be true only in the sense that they have general explanatory value and become accepted as

380Ibid., 8.

381Ibid., 8.

382Kenneth N. Waltz “Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory,” in Andrew Linklater, ed., International Relations: Critical concepts in Political Science, Volume IV (New York: Routledge, 2000) 1526. It should be noted that some neorealists reject the belief that assumptions about the world can be unrealistic and yet still produce good theory. See, in particular, John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, 30, where he criticizes Waltz for this view arguing instead that “a theory based on unrealistic or false assumptions will not explain much about how the world works.”

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a dominant intellectual paradigm. As such, “they construct a reality, but no one can say that it is the reality.” Furthermore, they are “true” only until the emergence of a new, more explanatory paradigm.

So how exactly does Waltz expect students of international relations to overcome the “strategic problem” of theory construction? Quite simply, according to Waltz: the “strategic problem” is overcome in the manner of other scientific fields, that is, artistically, “creatively” and by way of “brilliant intuition.” While “one can not say how the intuition comes and how the idea is born…one can say what they (ideas) will be about.” And what are these ideas about? “They will convey a sense of the unobservable relations of things. They will be about connections and causes by which sense is made of things observed. A theory is not the occurrences and the associations recorded, but it is instead the explanation of them.”

Properly conceived, therefore, theory construction may move beyond the “barren hypothetico-deductive” approach of positivism. Though deduction and induction are important contributors for Waltz, “using them in combination gives rise to a theory only if a creative idea emerges.” His reliance on creativity and intuition builds confidently on what he learns from the world of natural science, in particular, from Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. But however important the uncertainty principle is in rebuffing the extreme aspirations for exactitude by logical positivists in the early twentieth-century, it is fair to ask just how relevant the findings from sub-atomic physics are for the development of IR theory? What may be more relevant for students of international relations is further insight into the importance of intuition to Waltz’s larger ambition of theory construction. For

383Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 8, 9.
384Ibid., 11.
intuition, it turns out, is not only necessary for the initial act of discovery, according to Waltz, but also for the application of a particular theory to circumstance. At the level of circumstance (say, for example, is country A about to disrupt the existing balance of power by invading country C and how should country B respond?) a theory “has to be adduced by the person using it.”

But the process of adducing is never once explained since it belongs, according to Waltz, to the realm of foreign policy not IR theory (the latter tells us only what the former must cope with).

So, while Waltz’s neopositivism demonstrates a more subtle appreciation for how the world comes to the observer than positivism, our enthusiasm for it is tempered by the looseness with which Waltz treats those acts of discovery necessary for theory construction and which also help explain the behavior of states and statesmen alike. What makes Waltz’s treatment of this topic all the more surprising is Lakatos’ emphasis on the dialectical character of theory construction. Understanding this very process was integral to Lakatos’ creation of a research programme and its subsequent testing. It is odd that this does not elicit from Waltz a commensurate amount of attention.

Whatever may be said at this point about the strength of Waltz’s understanding of theory, and the epistemology that supports it, it is evident from the above that he presents students of international relations with a conception of theory that is detached from truth and reality as commonly understood. Waltz closely follows the footsteps of a tradition

385Waltz, “Evaluating Theories,” 916. He adds further that “theory is an instrument. The empirical material on which it is to be used is not found in the instrument.”

386By failing to explore in any detail the act of discovery relevant for theory creation, Waltz moves closer to Popper and, therefore, to positivism. See, for example, Popper’s comment that “the initial stage, the act of conceiving and inventing theory, seems to me to neither call for logical analysis nor be susceptible of it” quoted by John Worrall in “Heuristic Logic” and the ‘Logic of Scientific Discovery’ in Kamps, Kvasz, and Stoltzner, Appraising Lakatos, 87.
begun by Kant that is deeply skeptical of theory’s representational quality (i.e. ability to represent the truth). It is a tradition that understands theories of truth as worthless because of the deeply held belief that it is impossible to ascertain the empirical world with any degree of certainty (e.g. “nothing is ever both empirically and absolutely true”). Accordingly, truth requires a surrogate. For Waltz, like Kant, the surrogate for truth is method. While he credits Lakatos with this insight, Waltz’s rigid separation of truth and method has the effect of distancing himself from his mentor. Lakatos knew that too great an emphasis on method may lead one to forget that the real purpose of method is to lead students closer to the truth. Otherwise, for Lakatos, method becomes a pointless exercise. To escape this outcome, Lakatos turns anew to induction: “Only such “an inductive principle” can turn science from a mere game into an epistemologically rational exercise; from a set of lighthearted skeptical gambits pursued for intellectual fun into a more serious, fallibilist venture of approximating the Truth about the Universe.”387 This implies that truth stands distinct and independent of method for Lakatos. But, for Waltz, method is paramount and truth, a non-starter.

**Theory and The Will for Control**

Waltz’s epistemology and definition of theory gives rise to an even larger question that goes some way in explaining his real motivation. Given the weakened version of theory that he puts forth, along with the paucity of proven theories to date attributable to IR

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how are students of international relations to be persuaded to do the hard work of theory construction and testing when, as Waltz acknowledges, if we take the above mentioned epistemological challenge “seriously” (i.e. logically) one is rightfully “driven to despair”? Is his suggestion that we take this epistemological challenge as a kind of “strategic problem” the solution Waltz believes it to be? Since the likelihood is great that a student of international relations may well be “driven to despair” by such weighty epistemological concerns, are not students in need of a supplement to their natural fortitude to continue their research programmes in the face of such overwhelming difficulties?

We may further ask if truth and method are distinct for Waltz, and if the explanatory and predictive value of right method and theory is continually cheapened in an effort to create ever more parsimonious theories, why do it in the first place? Why engage in all of the theory construction and debates regarding right method, when, as Waltz admits, “a theory does not provide an account of what has happened or of what may happen?” This question is especially poignant if we recall that, for Waltz, only a student of history can provide the explanatory details regarding the past, which is just another way of saying that the historian’s approach to the study of international relations has by no means been replaced by Waltz’s neopositive tool kit.

Waltz does not address directly the type of disposition necessary for a commitment to methodological rigor, though he does comment on the desire that animates the quest for explanation. “The urge to explain is not born of idle curiosity alone. It is produced also by

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388 One of the few examples of real-world success that scholars point to with confidence is the “likelihood” that realist balance of power theory could have predicted the Sino-Soviet split in the 1950s. Had this maxim been listened to, a policy of accommodation with China would have begun years prior to the efforts of Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon. See Robert Keohane, ed., Neorealism and its Critics, 3, in the “Introduction” by Robert Keohane.

389 Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 8.
the desire to control, or at least to know if control is possible, rather than merely to predict.” Bearing in mind the explanatory and predictive shortcomings of theory for Waltz, the effort to control may be rightfully assumed to be a primary motivator for students of international relations. But in what sense does Waltz mean “control?” What Waltz may mean becomes clearer if the problem of creativity and intuition in theory construction is recalled. This is, remember, the problem for Waltz, from an epistemological as well as a practical standpoint. It happens to also be the focus of the methodological assumptions he recommends to students of IR theory. These assumptions, which include the isolation, abstraction, aggregation and idealization of phenomena, are the bedrock of all theoretical pursuits and their formation is the result of a student’s intuition. They may be “brazenly false,” according to Waltz, but they must never be arrived at “freely or whimsically.” So important is the need to take theory making seriously that Waltz quotes on more than one occasion Steven Weinberg’s maxim that the “most important thing…is not the decision that a theory is true, but the decision that it is worth taking seriously.” And though the resulting theories, like balance of power, remain divorced from reality and untestable in any direct sense of the term, they may “control” international relations in at least two distinct ways.

First, it is an “inescapable” fact for neopositivists like Waltz, Keohane, Nye and Mearsheimer that theory controls definitionally, for reality comes to the observer wrapped in theory. In the opinion of Keohane and Nye, “all empirical or practical analysis rests on it;”

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390Waltz “Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory,” 1526.
391Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 10.
“academic pens (invariably)…leave marks in the minds of statesmen with profound results for policy.” Those who fail to realize that theories control the way in which reality is perceived are simply “unconscious captives,” and such unconscious behavior risks leading “directly to inappropriate or even disastrous national policies.”

A student of international relations may thus reasonably conclude that since reality does not come devoid of theory, existing theory, if it fails to deliver the desired “progress,” must be replaced by more useful theory which, once accepted, thereafter defines what one means by reality.

Consequently, and secondly, theory controls in practice. This is to say, if a majority of students of international relations along with the practitioners of politics - statesmen and citizens - come to accept the definition of, say, what neorealism tells them about the concept of the balance of power, then this newly acquired theory-laden reality logically controls the way in which events are understood and reacted to.

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393 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1977). See p. 5 and 6 where the authors write of the “inescapable” quality of theory; see also John Mearsheimer, another structural realists like Waltz, who, in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001) offers equally forceful support for the conclusion that reality comes to the observer *a priori* theory-laden. Mearsheimer observes that “social science theories are often portrayed as the idle speculations of head-in-the-cloud academics that have little relevance to what goes on in the ‘real world.’…In this view, theory should fall almost exclusively within the purview of academics, whereas policymakers should rely on common sense, intuition, and practical experience to carry out their duties. This view is wrongheaded. In fact, none of us could understand the world we live in or make intelligent decisions without theories.” (18). Despite his neopositive belief that reality is not there simply for the taking, Mearsheimer, like many realists and neorealists, also tends to believe that a belief in a hard-core reality is what separates the realist tradition from critical theorists. Mearsheimer argues that “realism and critical theory have fundamentally different epistemologies and ontologies...Realists maintain that there is an objective and knowable world, which is separate from the observing world” whereas “critical theorists, on the other hand, ‘see subject and object in the historical world as a reciprocally interrelated whole.’” This contradiction in Mearsheimer’s thought is not explained.


395 Keohane and Nye’s claim that “all empirical or practical analysis rests on it” (theory) is representative of the epistemological basis of neopositivism. See Keohane & Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 6.
The implications of the “strategic problem” to which Waltz referred can now be more fully appreciated. Earlier, this problem referred to the epistemological and practical challenges to theory creation (i.e. the act of discovery) and application (i.e. the act of adducing). Now, the “strategic problem” assumes a larger significance. If the strategic goal of IR theory remains a “hope for peace” as Waltz, despite his moral agnosticism, claims, and if this hope for peace has historically led to all types of utopian efforts such as pleas for world government (even by some self-described realists like Hans Morgenthau), then the challenge, in this larger sense, is to discover or effect the means for which the most useful theory may gain sufficient acceptance such that it becomes operative in a concrete way for students and practitioners of international politics, therewith, making the goal of peace a reality. The traditional political means for gaining such acceptance was once unapologetically called propaganda. For Waltz, it takes the form of a strategic problem, perhaps, one might say, the strategic problem for 20th C. international relations theory.

The implication of Waltz’s strategic problem is encapsulated in a pregnant criticism by Waltz of Morgenthau’s behavioralism. Here, Waltz points to the need for controlling one’s subject matter as a logical consequence of theory construction. Morgenthau, for his part, focused on the internal characteristics of states and argued that a shared moral framework was key for the balance of power to be effective. Waltz concludes: “If the international-political outcomes are determined by what states are like, then we must be concerned with, and if necessary to change, the internal dispositions of the internationally important ones.”

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396Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, 30. For more on Waltz’s “hope for peace” and its implications for his larger theory, see Pangle and Ahrensildorf.

behavioralism, which is to say, its sheer implausibility. And yet the need for changing or controlling one’s subject matter is equally dear to Waltz’s chances of success. The end result for Waltz seems to be the creation of a theory that adheres to the strategic goal of peace by way of, among other things, balance of power and the sketching of a list of “do’s and don’t’s” for statesmen. It may be further argued, as I suggest, that adherence to a neopositive epistemology allows for the philosophical void that follows to be filled with the personally held views of the theorist. As we see in our treatment of Waltz’s theory of international relations, a consequence of neopositivism’s dismissal of the standard of common sense is that the personal views of the theorist can push their theories into an ever more counterintuitive and abstract form of argument – much like the “lighthearted skeptical gambits pursued for intellectual fun” that Lakatos cautioned against.


399Unlike the obvious moral agnosticism and relativism of Kenneth Waltz (see fn. 35) and John Mearsheimer, the claim that neopositivists, as a group, are morally agnostic in their approach may seem somewhat of a stretch as neoliberals, like Robert Keohane, have made a point of incorporating the relevance of moral ideas into their theory of international relations. However, while moral ideas have an obvious causal and cognitive component for Keohane and other neoliberals, it is by no means evident that moral ideas for neoliberals rise to the level of political significance on the international scene. For instance, when describing the reach of an article he co-authored called “Ideas and Foreign Policy,” Keohane carefully sectioned off from his study those political ideas which do not “take for granted a world view according to which human beings are assumed to be active agents in the construction of their destinies,” say, for example, “traditionalists or religious fundamentalist societies.” (9). At the writing of his essay, one such society would have been the Soviet Union; today, it would include some Islamic societies. Thus, in regards to those societies with whom the West is mired in the most obvious political conflict, Keohane’s study offers no insight because such conflict does not form part of his analysis. In fact, political conflict of this kind does not merit the slightest mention in an article pertaining to the impact of moral ideas on foreign policy. By way of such a narrow study, Keohane seems to embody an aversion to the moral questions which naturally arise from any meaningful study of political conflict. See Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, “Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework” in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds, Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). See also Joseph Nye, Ethics and Foreign Policy, (Wye Plantation: Aspen Institute, 1983), specifically Chapter II, “Judging Moral Arguments” where Nye, while putting forth a persuasive case for the subtleties of moral argument, also cautions in the opening paragraphs that his argument is limited to the Western tradition.
Waltz’s Theory of International Relations

To fully appreciate the influence of Waltz’s personal views on his theory of international relations, it is important to begin with the enormous contributions he has made to the field since the publication of *Man, the State and War*. In this seminal work, Waltz develops a structural theory of international relations to explain the frequent recurrence of war between nations. In contrast to his more relativistic epistemology, Waltz puts forth a theory of international relations that is illustrative of a classical or even positivistic understanding of the world and thus implies a materialist conception of reality. The apparent contradiction in Waltz’s thinking highlights the almost compulsory need for taking the world as it appears to the average person – a world filled with states and, for Waltz, a world of states that operate in a system of anarchy.

In a review of the great thinkers of international relations throughout history, Waltz creates a schematic of three “images.” “First image” thinkers tend to emphasize the relevance of human nature in the interplay of nations. For Augustine, Hobbes and Morgenthau, the cause of international conflict is rooted in the evil, selfish and power hungry ways of human beings. “Second image” thinkers like Kant and Marx, conversely, believe that that the root cause of international conflict has more to do with the internal composition of states. Accordingly, some political structures are conducive to peace and others are disruptive and prone to conflict.

Waltz rejects the first two “images” on the basis of the preponderance of the historical evidence. Waltz identifies his neorealism with “third image” thinkers who believe that the cause of international conflict lies in the structure of the international system. In the
absence of any international governing authority, “third image” thinkers understand the world to be characterized by anarchy. In Waltz’s words:

For the purposes of developing a theory, states are cast as unitary actors wanting at least to survive, and are taken to be the system’s constituent units. The essential structure of the system is anarchy – the absence of a central monopoly of legitimate force…From the vantage point of neorealist theory, competition and conflict among states stem directly from the twin facts of life under conditions of anarchy: States in an anarchic order must provide for their own security…The recurrence of war is explained by the structure of the international system.400

With regard to the Kantian idealism of “second image” thinkers, Waltz feels strongly that even if all states assumed a more representative, liberal form of government this would still not suffice given the powerful set of incentives that the absence of a world governing authority exerts on the actions of states. War is the natural outcome in such a context.

Waltz’s rejection of “first image” thinkers stems from his belief that human nature is too complicated and contradictory to usefully explain why wars happen. After all, for every act of human selfishness, one can find counterexamples of kindness, love and respect. Though the real problem with “first image” thinkers, Waltz admits elsewhere, is that to engage in judgments regarding human nature is “to bog down in a welter of facts and value judgments.”

To say, then, that certain things happen because men are stupid or bad is a hypothesis that is accepted or rejected according to the mood of the writer. It is a

statement that evidence cannot prove or disprove, for what we make of our evidence depends on the theory we hold.\textsuperscript{401}

And yet, in what amounts to an ironic twist, Waltz’s rejection of the human nature argument gives him a reason to “hope for peace.” Similar to Morgenthau’s reliance on moral relativism as a means of increasing tolerance and respect for others, Waltz concludes:

If human nature is the cause of war and if, as in the systems of first-image pessimists, human nature is fixed, then we can never hope for peace. If human nature is but one of the causes of war, then, even on the assumption that human nature is fixed, we can properly carry on a search for the conditions of peace.\textsuperscript{402}

But Waltz does not stop there. In making what he calls one of neorealism’s most important revisions of realist theory, he argues that states are more concerned with considerations of their security than they are with the accumulation of power - in fact, Waltz understands power as no more than a means for states to increase their security. In the process, Waltz tenders an implicit theory of human nature. As Pangle and Ahrensdorf observe:

By claiming that states’ “paramount” and “ultimate” concern is necessarily, or is likely to be, survival and security rather than power, glory, and religious salvation, Waltz presents an account of human nature which, in contrast with the pessimistic accounts of Augustine, Hobbes, and Morgenthau, would seem to be compatible with and supportive of, not to say driven by, Waltz’s hope for peace.\textsuperscript{403}

\textsuperscript{401}Waltz, \textit{Man, State and War}, 27 – 28.

\textsuperscript{402}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{403}Pangle and Ahrensdorf, 245.
But if human beings are truly motivated by a concern for security, why is history replete with examples of war? The obvious answer, for Waltz, must be the anarchic structure of the international system. Yet this would seem to present an apparent contradiction in the manner in which human beings have chosen to organize their lives. If states and their inhabitants truly prize their security above all else, then they must find a way to reorganize the international system. This logically leads to an argument in favor of world government. Waltz admits as much, but he rejects this “obvious conclusion” because, practically speaking, world government is impossible.\(^404\) The heterogeneity of states makes it impossible to conceive of a situation where a central authority could rule effectively. World government also raises the specter of totalitarianism and increases the likelihood of rebellion against the center and a collapse into civil war. “The greater the power of the center,” Waltz writes, “the greater the incentive for states to engage in a struggle to control it.”\(^405\) But this implies that even a nonanarchic world structure would lead to war.

Waltz goes further still: “Were world government attempted, we might find ourselves dying in the attempt to unite, or uniting and living a life worse than death.”\(^406\) Elsewhere, he refers to the importance of human freedom: “States, like people, are insecure in proportion to the extent of their freedom. If freedom is wanted, insecurity is accepted.”\(^407\)

We may conclude at this stage that Waltz is, surprisingly, willing to choose anarchy in the international system over the prospect of perpetual peace because of the risk that world

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\(^404\) See Waltz, *Man, State and War*, 27 – 28 where Waltz agrees that “in the international as in the domestic sphere, if anarchy is the cause (of war), the obvious conclusion is that government is the cure.”

\(^405\) Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 112.

\(^406\) Waltz, *Man, State and War*, 15, 228 or 163

government poses for human freedom. This is an unexpected outcome and points to a
tendency in Waltz to pivot away from the logical implications of his earlier assumptions. In
doing so, as we saw when reviewing Waltz’s epistemological writings, he is comfortable
relying on what seems, at times, to be nothing more than an appeal to personal preference
which, in this case, happens to be the liberal aim of human freedom.

The Balance of Power and the Hope for Peace

In the final analysis, Waltz moves beyond the binary choice of anarchy and
totalitarianism or freedom and security. It is a happy coincidence for Waltz that in the
twentieth century the combination of great powers and nuclear weapons defined the
structure of the international system. Like many realists before him, the balance of power
offers Waltz the best chance for international stability and security. Given Waltz’s
skepticism regarding the very possibility of morality or truth, he presents the concept of the
balance of power as something that best aligns reality with the hope for peace. Writing
during the height of the Cold War, Waltz observes: “At the level of the international system,
one may hope that power, which has recently come into closer balance, remains there. A
military competition, if it is a close one, calls for caution on part of the competitors.”408 Yet
Waltz does not, like realists before him, believe that the balance of power is simply a matter
of prudence. He argues instead that the balance of power is a logical outcome to the
anarchy that defines the international system. He makes three basic points in support of this
thesis. First, states are primarily concerned with their security; second, in conditions of

anarchy, states must rely on themselves for their defense; third, since states are rational, they will likely form coalitions to balance the threat from greater powers.

If states wished to maximize power, they would join the stronger side, and we would see a world hegemony formed. This does not happen, because balancing, not bandwagoning, is the behavior induced by the (international) system. The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system. 409

So strong is the tendency toward a balance of power that they “tend to form whether some or all states consciously aim to establish and maintain a balance, or whether some or all states aim for universal domination.”410

Waltz admits, however, that while there exists a strong impetus for the formation of a balance of power, such balances are fragile constructs. They tend to be pulled apart and break and, yet, over time they recurrently form. This is a fortuitous thing, too; “for the sake of stability, (and) peace,” Waltz argues, “we (should) prefer a world of two great powers to a world of several or more.”411

The peaceful quality of a bipolar world is further enhanced by the presence of nuclear weapons. With the development of nuclear weapons, the balance of power between two great powers in the twentieth century solidified.

It is in this context that Waltz writes optimistically that “nuclear weapons have been the second force working for peace in the post-world war.”412 His optimism follows from

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409 Ibid. 125-126.
410 Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 119.
411 Ibid. 161.
his belief that “defense and deterrence are made easier and more reliable by the spread of nuclear weapons” for the simple reason that the risk/reward calculation for waging war has been permanently altered. Since the risk of destruction in a nuclear exchange is so great and the reward so small, tension between the superpowers leads not to “escalation but de-escalation.” In this context, only “miscalculation causes war.” The cost for miscalculation in a nuclear world is such that it instills a level of caution and moderation among the great powers unknown previously in human history.

“Nuclear worlds call for and encourage a different kind of reasoning,” Waltz writes. They concentrate the mind on the risks of war and encourage a cautious approach with an emphasis on diplomacy and risk management. So strong is the concentrating power of nuclear weapons that Waltz confidently dismisses, like Bernard Brodie before him, the imaginings of so-called “scenarists” like Albert Wohlstetter, who dream up situations where the use of nuclear weapons becomes a plausible response to internal or external crises. Waltz describes such scenarios as “silly” and somehow detached from the real world of hard-nosed realism. The reason for Waltz’s oracular confidence: nuclear war is the worst possible outcome and therefore, no matter how humiliating a “defeat in a peripheral war” or loss of “key satellites” (Wohlstetter), no state would possibly make the mistake of launching an attack on a nuclear adversary. In the nuclear age, states, as Brodie predicted, proceed “very carefully.” Their caution provides the balance of power with durability. So strong is

412Waltz, “More May be Better,” 3.
413Ibid., 5.
414Ibid., 6.
415Ibid., 20.
416Quote by Brodie found in Waltz, ibid.
Waltz’s belief that the balance of nuclear power can be “easily made sturdy” that he disregards the nuances of weapons systems analysis in favor of the logic of sheer numbers.\footnote{Ibid., 15. Waltz comments that “in recent years, we have exaggerated the difficulty of deterrence by shifting attention from situations to weaponry and from weapons systems to their components.”}

Waltz, however, tries to have it both ways. While the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons is, on the one hand, obvious, given their destructive power, it relies, to no small extent, on the possible irrationality of the attacked. Quoting Schilling’s insight regarding the “threat that leaves something to chance,” Waltz observes that “no state can bet heavily on another’s rationality.” The deterrent effect of nuclear weapons is enhanced precisely because one cannot predict how a state might act once attacked. Thus while a would-be aggressor, for Waltz, is logically directed toward a more cautious approach such reasoned caution is, by itself, an insufficient guarantor of peace. The sober realism that is a consequence of the destructive power of nuclear weapons is therefore in need of the kind of supplement that results from the unpredictability of irrational behavior if it is to be successful.

Despite a dependence on irrational, unpredictable behavior, Waltz is contemptuous of the prospect that an aggressor might resort to the use of nuclear weapons, treating this possibility as sheer “madness.”\footnote{Ibid., 20. This is in reference to the prospect that Hitler, if armed with nuclear weapons, might have ordered their use.} But doesn’t the potential irrationality on part of the attacked - that which gives pause to a would-be aggressor - apply equally to the thought processes of the aggressor? Is it not possible for a state to initiate a nuclear exchange even if this entails its own destruction? Waltz is dismissive. His confidence in the moderating influence of nuclear weapons on would-be aggressors is so great that, for Waltz, “to ask why a county should carry out its deterrent threat once deterrence has failed is to ask the wrong
question.” Recall that, for Wohlstetter, this was the question that needs answering otherwise a state consigns itself logically to one of two options, suicide or surrender. But for Waltz it is more important that in a nuclear world “we should look less at the retaliator’s conceivable inhibitions and more at the challenger’s obvious risks.” These risks are so disproportionate to any potential rewards that Waltz writes of a “deterrent ideal” in the nuclear age concluding emphatically that “the balance of terror is indestructible.”

Nuclear weapons, responsibly used, make wars hard to start. Nations that have nuclear weapons have strong incentives to use them responsibly. These statements hold for small as well as for big nuclear powers. Because they do, the measured spread of nuclear weapons is more to be welcomed than feared.

Waltz’s comfort in the balance of terrors extends to non-state actors as well, including terrorists groups with no known return address:

Fear of nuclear terror arises from the assumption that if terrorists can get nuclear weapons they will get them, and that then all hell will break loose. This is comparable to assuming that if weak states get nuclear weapons, they will use them for aggression. Both assumptions are false. Would the course of action we fear, if followed, promise more gains than losses or more pains than profits? The answers are obvious. Terrorists have some hope of reaching their long-term goals through patient pressure and constant harassment. They cannot hope to do so by issuing unsustainable threats to wreak great destruction, threats they would not want to execute anyway.

419 Ibid., 18.
420 Ibid., 30.
421 “Waltz Responds to Sagan,” 95-96. “Nuclear weapons reduced the chances of war between the United States and the Soviet Union and between the Soviet Union and China. One must expect them to have similar effect elsewhere. Where nuclear weapons threaten to make the cost of wars immense, who will dare to start them?...The likelihood of wars decreases as deterrent and defensive capabilities increase. Nuclear weapons make war hard to start. These statements hold for small as well as for big nuclear powers. Because they do, the gradual spread of nuclear weapons is more to be welcomed than feared.”
Waltz’s argument, at this point, seems to defy not only common sense but a basic principle of logic. The N+1 problem addressed by Wohlstetter, whereby the proliferation of weapons mathematically increases the likelihood of their use, is simply brushed aside by Waltz with a casualness that seems almost reckless. We can appreciate Waltz’s confidence only if we understand that, for him, human beings are possessed with no greater passion than the fear of death. It is this belief in the fear of death, rather than the distinction that Waltz draws between balancing and bandwagoning, that best explains the differences between neorealism and neoconservatism. In addition to contrasting epistemologies and theoretical frameworks, therefore, neorealism and neoconservatism differ in their answer to the most fundamental of all questions: what is human nature? Here, the choice is between a hobbesian belief in the strength of the fear that individuals (and by extension, states) feel at the thought of their own demise (and how this can be useful in making predictions about what humans will and will not do) and a multitude of other, less concrete fears and desires (pride, glory, dignity, etc.) that might motivate human beings to consciously risk their lives and that of their political communities. Operating with different conceptions of human nature, neorealists and neoconservatives arrive at very different conclusions.

Waltz’s confidence in the motivating power of the fear of death seems rather quaint in a post-9/11 world. While his conception of human nature strikes the reader as unexpected, given his relativistic epistemology and earlier rejection of “first image” thinkers like Hobbes, it does set his theory apart as decidedly less political and, as a result, less messy than neoconservatism. It is less political because it seeks to constrict the evidence of history and experience, which teaches that human beings are capable of all sorts of behavior, in favor of a belief that certain types of behavior are not only irrational but, because irrational,
unlikely to occur in practice. Neoconservatism, conversely, adopts a wider perspective of what humans are capable of and, as a result, are free to imagine all sorts of threats and possibilities that many contemporary social and political scientists simply do not. This is not only true of terrorists and their potential use of nuclear weapons but also of the earlier debate regarding MAD theory, détente and, as we will see, the debate involving the US decision to invade Iraq.

**Polar Opposites: Waltz, Contemporary IR Theory and Neoconservatism**

The contradictions between Waltz’s epistemology and theory make it challenging to develop anything more than a fragmentary understanding of his thought. Nonetheless, from what we have reviewed, we may sketch a sharp distinction between neoconservatism, Waltz and, because of a shared neopositive epistemology, much of contemporary international relations theory.

To summarize, neopositivism rejects the common understanding that reality comes pre-packaged in similar fashion for everyone. It does this in favor of an empirical and moral relativism. By rejecting the standard of common sense, neopositivism clears the way for a theory of international relations whose aim is the reconstitution of the manner in which statesmen and policy makers commonly understand the world. Contemporary IR theory is therefore revolutionary at its core, in both an epistemological and ontological sense.

Secondly, the empirical and moral relativism put forth by neopositivism ends up replacing the common sense understanding with the personal aspirations, or will, of the theorist. For instance, contemporary IR theory is dominated, almost to a theorist, by a
liberal hope for peace and looks upon its science as the means for providing content to this hope. But because of its reliance on such a radical form of relativism, contemporary IR theory leaves its liberal aims without a philosophical basis and thus vulnerable to passing fads or competing ideologies. In this sense, then, the science of contemporary IR theory is open to the highest bidder. Yet, notwithstanding its declared empirical and moral relativism, neorealism maintains a faith in the rationality of human beings and the supremacy of the desire for self-preservation (or fear of death) over other human desires. This faith leaves neorealism increasingly dogmatic for contradictory evidence must be continually ignored in order to maintain analytical clarity and a rigorous propositional logic.

With each of these conclusions regarding neorealism and much of contemporary IR theory - the empirical and moral relativism, the revolutionary character of its theory-making, the reliance on the personal aspirations of the theorist, and the increasingly dogmatic quality of its conclusions - we grasp more fully the significance of neoconservatism’s outlook on the world. As reviewed in the first two chapters, neoconservatives accept as their starting point for political discussion the existence of a shared reality, accessible to all rational human beings. It is a reality that does not require the assistance of *a priori* theory-making or a counterintuitive epistemology. In contrast to the revolutionary character of Waltz’s theory, neoconservatives pride themselves on taking human beings as they are - as individuals capable of reason but equally prone to irrational or fanatical behavior. Neoconservatives, furthermore, tend to eschew a personal desire for a given outcome (e.g. world peace, reducing poverty, etc.) in favor of following the facts wherever they happen to lead. Consequently, with their faith in the power of reasoned argument, neoconservatives pride themselves on avoiding a dogmatic approach to policy issues. Neoconservatives might go so far as to argue that their policies are beyond the normal limits of partisanship. In making
this claim, of course, we implicitly raise the question of whether, in an age of ideology, it is possible to be non-ideological, that is, to follow the facts where they lead?

In some ways, the comparison is unfair: neoconservatives and neorealists are really playing a different game. Neorealists and contemporary IR theorists are trying to create a science of international politics with predictive and explanatory power. In order to do so, many IR theorists feel compelled to remove the cumbersomeness of morality in favor of strategic and materialist concerns. This leaves morality to sociologists and psychologists to explain. For neoconservatives, and other critics, this renders their endeavors devoid of politics as normally understood.\textsuperscript{422} For politics without morality leads to empty formalism and a narrowing discussion of methodology and the will to power.\textsuperscript{423}

Such claims regarding neoconservatism’s non-ideological basis may strike the reader as fanciful. After all, the policy recommendations for which neoconservatives are best known include the Team “B” conclusions and the war in Iraq. Indeed, the claim that neoconservatism is represented by an adherence to common sense thinking and an unapologetic following of the facts must be considered in light of the bullish claims many neoconservatives made regarding the benefits of removing Saddam Hussein from power. We are right to ask, if common sense were indeed a guide, what went wrong? Why has little, if anything, that neoconservatives foretold materialized? Moreover, how does neoconservatism go from a history of right makes might – for example, the argument that standing up to bullies is a moral stand that will yield strategic benefits – to an argument that


might makes right as so many critics of neoconservatism maintain? How can an intellectual movement go from a reliance on common sense to what Francis Fukuyama has characterized as a “psychologically handicapped” reliance on excessive militarism? These are the questions that must be answered in the next and final chapter.

Ironically, our answer to these questions may lie in the more political character of neoconservatism. Starting from the standpoint that human nature is varied does not, in and of itself, provide the prudence necessary for distinguishing between the possible and the probable, between hard evidence and the so-called “one percent doctrine” adopted by the Bush Administration, where every threat is tantamount to a “certainty.”

“Galloping abstractions” (Irving Kristol), it seems, are not confined solely to those who reject common sense or who base their theories on constricted views of human nature. The task for the next and final chapter is to investigate the basis to neoconservatism’s advocacy for the war in Iraq and whether critics like Fukuyama, John Mearsheimer, and countless others, are correct in their assessment that neoconservatives became detached from reality by exaggerating the challenges for US foreign policy in a post-9/11 world.

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CHAPTER 5

THE WAR OVER IRAQ: NEOCONSERVATISM, REALISM AND THE MATTER OF PRUDENCE

Over the course of the four previous chapters, I have argued that neoconservatives differ from their academic and foreign policy counterparts in several crucial respects. Neoconservatives stand apart from realists, neorealists, neoliberals and liberal internationalists for reasons that are moral, political and strategic in character. The origin of these differences is found in the controversies surrounding the war in Vietnam and the policies of arms control and détente of the early 1970s. As we made our way through chapters 3 and 4, however, it became apparent that these differences were not merely policy oriented, no matter how profound. Rather, they were, and are, philosophical and epistemological in nature. At their core, they center on questions of truth and reality and whether such concepts retain more than a purely personal or psychological meaning. The differences between neoconservatism and the other mainstream traditions brought to the fore the reliance of much of 20th century political and social thought on historicism and relativism, the belief that all thought is contingent on the circumstances of a particular time and place. This, I have argued, leaves the idea of an independent, commonly accepted reality unapproachable by many of our selected theorists without the extensive use of quotation
marks. It also compels our selected theorists to rely on a counterintuitive logic in order to explain policy preferences which, precisely because of their inability to agree on a shared reality, end up as expressions of the personal aspirations or will of the theorist.

I have argued from the beginning that neoconservatism begins, in contrast, with the standard of common sense as the starting point for political, moral and philosophical debate. This allows neoconservatives to assume a shared reality for all public policy participants. In beginning with common sense, they are able to incorporate into their writings a more nuanced understanding of human nature that permits of both rational and irrational behavior. Ironically, yet inconsistently, the relativism and historicism of the theorists we have reviewed have led some to precisely the opposite conclusion: that human beings are motivated by a singular desire for survival or fear of death. A static understanding of human nature allows these theorists to posit a basis for predicting state behavior and individual action yet, as I have argued throughout, it deprives them of the flexibility necessary to account for a range of outcomes that the real world presents to policy makers.

This thesis has been an effort to demonstrate that neoconservative conceptions of human nature and a belief in the existence of a shared empirical and moral reality explain their unique approach to foreign policy and, in the words of John Mearsheimer, entitles neoconservatism the status of a “competing theor(y) of international politics.” In summarizing the previous four chapters, I conclude that there are three principles to neoconservatism which, when combined, distinguish it from the other major theoretical traditions regarding the study of international politics and foreign policy.

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First, there exists among neoconservatives a steadfast belief in common sense and in a shared moral and empirical reality. By anchoring their political arguments on the seabed of a shared reality, neoconservatives present a model for strategic clarity and avoid the counterintuitive games and contorted logic that has defined much of 20th century political thought. Such clarity allows them to articulate public policies that have unambiguous beginnings and endings. Combining the moral language of right and wrong with a reliance on common sense goals like ‘winning’ and ‘losing,’ neoconservatives hold enormous advantages over other theoretical traditions, especially realism, in persuading US politicians and the American public of the merits of their policy recommendations. Moreover, the reliance on common sense makes it easier for neoconservatives to accept human nature and political circumstance as presented to them and to come up with policies that best respond to this reality. This means that so-called worst case scenarios are more fully considered rather than swept under the rug of theoretical assumptions that preclude certain types of state or individual action (e.g. suicide, national or otherwise).

Second, morality matters. This has at least three important implications for neoconservatism. One, foreign policy is never simply about power considerations and state interests. Foreign policy decisions must include talk about values and the politically charged proposition that certain values, like democracy,426 are morally superior to others. Neoconservatives are quite comfortable in declaring that the values of the United States, those of democracy, free markets, freedom of association, are indeed better than the values

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426Some neoconservatives have come to view democracy as interchangeable with morality. See, in particular, Joshua Muravchik, “The Past, Present and Future of Neoconservatism,” Commentary, October 2007, 19-29 and Charles Krauthammer, “In Defense of Global Realism,” The National Interest, Fall 2004, 15-25. Both Muravchik and Krauthammer see the spread of democracy as the “end and the means” of a neoconservative foreign policy, albeit one that is “targeted, focused and limited” in its application (Krauthammer, 16). As I have argued throughout, morality as a broader concept is a core belief to neoconservatives with democracy an important moral goal.
espoused by many countries around the world. Two, the belief that morality matters logically means that states or regimes are to be held to certain norms of international behavior and therefore state sovereignty has its limits. This means that not all states are to be treated equally, that those which fail to adhere to certain international norms may have their right of sovereignty abrogated. The legitimacy conferred on the United States in this moral fight is not bestowed by any institution, neither the United Nations Security Council or NATO has this power, but rather it is a right inherent to morality itself and the need for international norms to have real consequences. Three, for neoconservatives, principles count.427 When dealing with one’s friends or enemies, it is important to keep one’s word, to stand up to bullies directly and clearly, to back one’s friends in a fight, etc. Consistently adhering to principle is not only the morally right thing to do but also carries with it important practical and strategic benefits.

Third, neoconservatives are more comfortable with the prospect of using force to resolve international conflict than the vast majority of realists, liberal internationalists or mainstream conservatives. It is noteworthy that while many realists talk about how the international system is a function of power politics, they tend to advocate for diplomacy over force in almost every crisis.428 Neoconservatives, to the contrary, more readily acknowledge the limits of diplomacy when dealing with intractable ideological conflicts such as the Cold War fight against communism or the current war on terror. When confronted by an enemy like the Soviet Union or Al Qaeda, where morality and strategy converge,

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428This was true even in case of the war in Afghanistan. See John Mearsheimer’s letter to The New York Times entitled “Guns Won’t Win the Afghan War” on November 4, 2001 where he calls for diplomacy in Afghanistan in lieu of military force because, quite frankly, “Americans must face a hard reality: massive military force is not a winning weapon against these enemies.” Instead, he advocates “a strategy that emphasizes clever diplomacy,” among other things.
neoconservatives are much more apt to call for a forceful response than any other mainstream foreign policy tradition; intractable ideological conflict, in their opinion, is not going to be resolved diplomatically or with better marketing of US values and objectives. Given the leadership role of the United States in military matters, along with very sharp differences of opinion in the US and Europe regarding the legitimacy of force, neoconservatives present themselves as champions of American exceptionalism and a willingness to act unilaterally when necessary.

These three principles were in sharp relief during the period leading up to and following the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The war in Iraq was a singular neoconservative moment in American politics, as Francis Fukuyama has described it, because, with rare exception, the moral, political and strategic justifications for the war in Iraq were provided most comprehensively by neoconservatives. Men like Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Bill Kristol, Robert Kagan, Zalmay Khalilzad, Charles Krauthammer, Gary Schmitt, Joshua Muravchik, and Norman Podhoretz were, in important respects, the architects of this debate and they will forever be linked to the consequences of the Bush Administration’s decision to invade Iraq.

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430 Such exceptions include liberal internationalist thinkers like Fareed Zakaria, Michael Ignatieff and Thomas Freedman.
Iraq: The Neoconservative Moment

Neoconservatives have for years approached matters of deterrence, the use of preemptive force, the repudiation of moral relativism, and the moral charge of the United States in ways that easily lend themselves to a doctrine associated, by critics and proponents alike, with American exceptionalism. With the focus by a younger generation of neoconservatives during the 1990s on concepts like regime change, benevolent hegemony and a conscious distancing from realism and its skepticism regarding the moral objectives of foreign policy, the Bush Doctrine carries the obvious imprint of neoconservatism. As articulated by the president in the *National Security Strategy of the United States* released in September 2002, in his speech to Congress on September 20, 2001, the State of The Union Address of January 20th, 2002, his West Point and American Enterprise Institute speeches of June 2002 and February 2003, the Bush Doctrine prepared the way for neoconservative principles to become the standing foreign policy of the United States.

In this final chapter, I propose splitting the debate surrounding the Bush Doctrine and the war in Iraq into two unequal parts, summarizing first the justifications for the war whose substance and origin are neoconservative and, second, how these ideas were received and debated by opponents including representatives of the realist tradition as well as European allies of the United States. Realists, almost to a theorist, were deeply opposed to

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431 On benevolent hegemony, see William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” 18-32; on the unrealistic nature of realism see Paul Wolfowitz, “Remembering the Future.”

432 Norman Podhoretz, “World War IV,” 26, 27. Some analysts do not include the September 2001 speech to Congress as part of the doctrine, but for Podhoretz this represents its point of departure.

the war in Iraq. The question that I think needs answering is on what basis were neoconservative arguments received by traditions constructed on such fundamentally opposed political, philosophical, epistemological and moral foundations? How did traditions like realism react to the neoconservative emphasis that the war in Iraq was central to the war on terrorism and the need to arrest the proliferation of nuclear weapons in an era of global terrorism (especially the risk that terrorist organizations might be granted access to such weapons by rogue states like Iraq) when realists understand the matter of deterrence, state behavior and rationality in such diametrically opposed ways? Relatedly, what prompted European allies of the United States, like France and Germany, to react with alarm to the willingness of the United States to invoke the principle of American exceptionalism in the face of growing opposition by the international community to a preemptive invasion of Iraq? Did this reaction stem solely from the European desire for all military action to proceed under the auspices of the United Nations? Or did European alarm stem from the belief that US hegemony itself was a danger to a liberal world order?

The war in Iraq was presented as a critical strategic move in the larger war on terrorism. For neoconservatives, it represented a concerted effort by the United States to move beyond retribution for the attacks on 9/11 and toward a policy of prevention and self-defense. Proponents of invading Iraq made three arguments about which critics disagreed.

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almost point for point. At its most basic, the case for war rested on a threat assessment of Iraq, its pattern of aggression, its support for terrorism, its possession of, or willingness to, acquire weapons of mass destruction (in particular, nuclear weapons) and the fear that these weapons could be used to attack or blackmail the United States; worse still, the nexus between Saddam Hussein’s regime, its ties to terrorist organizations and nuclear weapons heightened the fear that such weapons might be transferred surreptitiously to Muslim extremists like Al Qaeda and used to attack or blackmail the US. The threat represented by Iraq in the aftermath of 9/11 was believed to be existential to the very survival of the United States. Second, there is the danger of failed states like Iraq and Afghanistan, which offer terrorists a potential safe haven to train and promote their ideology. Given the limitations of diplomacy, traditional deterrence and international policing efforts in blunting the appeal of Al Qaeda’s brand of religiously inspired terrorism, neoconservatives viewed these safe havens as autonomous zones beyond the reach of the international community. The only effective response, they argued, was direct military action. Third, proponents of the war believed that the authoritarianism common to the Middle East was explanatory, in part, of the religious extremism and hatred of the West and the United States by large numbers of Muslims. Regime change in Iraq afforded the United States the opportunity to alter the political landscape of the region. Taken together, the case for war in Iraq led neoconservatives and the Bush Administration to advocate a policy of regime change through force as the sole means to overcome at once the limits of diplomacy and traditional deterrence and to broaden the scope of the war on terrorism by placing pressure on terrorist organizations and their supporters. Moreover, regime change in Iraq opened the way for the

United States to potentially moderate the political and religious extremism of the Middle East through the establishment of a more representative form of government in Iraq.

The case for war was widely criticized by US allies, liberal internationalists and realists. Critics of the war raised serious doubts about the wisdom of the Bush Administration’s policy of regime change in Iraq. This chapter highlights the theoretical and prudential case against invading Iraq. The theoretical argument against the war was made most forcefully by realists like John Mearsheimer, Robert Jervis and Brent Scowcroft. They charged the Bush Administration and its policy of regime change with a deficient understanding of deterrence and how states actually behave in the international system. Proponents of the war were mistaken, these theorists claimed, in thinking that nuclear weapons fundamentally weakened the deterrence options available to the United States and the West in their efforts to contain Saddam Hussein. We revisit here our earlier discussions in Chapters 1 and 4 relating to realist notions of deterrence, balance of power and theories of human nature and how their perspective contrasts with that of neoconservatism.

There were also prudential considerations for not invading Iraq. Such considerations were put forth forcefully by European nations opposed to a US invasion. The leaders of France and Germany were joined by realists like Brent Scowcroft and a former neoconservative, Francis Fukuyama, in alleging that the war was a reckless venture that relied too heavily on the US military, lacked international legitimacy and risked too much by way of blood and treasure for too little gain. These critics argued persuasively that Saddam Hussein was trapped in a box and it was there that the United States should have left him. Furthermore, they argued that a US invasion could unleash sectarian or nationalistic forces that might wreak havoc in an already volatile region of the world. The Europeans went a
step further, raising the ugly specter of US hegemony unrestrained by the international community. The reality of US military supremacy combined with a doctrine of preemption posed a serious threat to a world order governed by consent and liberal values, according to many Europeans.

In light of the disastrous consequences that followed the US invasion of Iraq, it is right to ask whether this younger generation of neoconservatives have overextended themselves in their reliance on militarism and US exceptionalism? Is it true, as Francis Fukuyama suggests, that the total US victory in the Cold War, won, in large part, on the basis of policies and tactics advocated by neoconservatives, has left neoconservatism “psychologically handicapped”\footnote{Francis Fukuyama, \textit{America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy}, 61.} when dealing with a post-9/11 world and global terrorism to say nothing of European and global intransigence at US exceptionalism? Is it true that neoconservatives have become so drunk with success that they have put aside their own skepticism regarding social engineering - dating back to the days of the Great Society projects of the Johnson Administration - and now advocate complex nation-building with a breezy casualness bordering on recklessness? Crucially, given the accusation that their opponent’s theories are terminally weakened by a reliance on “galloping abstractions” (Irving Kristol), has the neoconservative emphasis on risk, no matter how small or unlikely, led to the reckless abandon of the very principle on which their views of the world are founded, common sense, in favor of their own galloping abstractions?
From Retaliation to Preemption: 9/11 to Iraq

The logical consequences to the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C included swift retaliation against Afghanistan, the removal of the Taliban from power, and increased cooperation and coordination in policing international terrorism. These steps were prudent and widely accepted. But for neoconservatives and the Bush Administration, September 11th forever altered the manner in which the United States understood and tolerated threats to its national security. To their core, neoconservatives and members of the Bush Administration believed that had Al Qaeda been capable of killing 30,000 or 300,000 Americans on September 11th, they would have done so without hesitation. Read this way, the nexus between global terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and rogue states which may willingly transfer these weapons to terrorists, who may then serve as surrogates in their war with the United States, represents an existential threat. For many Europeans and domestic critics of the Bush Administration, the threat of global terrorism was more localized and best approached through improved policing tactics, a more robust and “clever diplomacy” (Mearsheimer), and a targeted use of force confined to surgical strikes against known terrorist training camps. In this context, the attacks on September 11th were

437 For examples of a more localized approach to the War on Terrorism, see Michael Howard, “What’s In a Name? How to Fight the War on Terrorism,” Foreign Affairs 81 (2002): 8-13; and Joseph S. Nye, Sr., “The Velvet Hegemon,” Foreign Policy, May/June 2003, 74-75. In a similar vein, John Mearsheimer cautioned against relying too much on force in the War on Terrorism and this even in the case of the war in Afghanistan. The quote “clever diplomacy” comes from aforementioned op-ed to The New York Times on November 4, 2001. See also, Milton Beardon, “Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empire,” Foreign Affairs 80 (2001): 17-30. See also the French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin address to the United Nations on March 19, 2003 for an eloquent expression of the European point of view that “the choice is indeed between two visions of the world”, one which favors diplomacy and the other force in “Iraq: Address By His Excellency Dominique de Villepin, French Foreign Minister Of Foreign Affairs Before The United Nations Security Council, 3/19/2008” located at http://www.un.int/france/documents_anglais/030319_cs_villepin_irak.htm
interpreted as a “surprisingly successful one-of-a-kind event,” which, notwithstanding its magnitude, did not warrant a wholesale change to US foreign policy.

For neoconservatives, it is the prevalence of this attitude, so commonplace during the previous decade, that allowed Al Qaeda to materialize into an existential threat in the first place. The 1990s were marked by a failure to adhere to a strategy consistent with America’s role and responsibility in a unipolar world. The decade was also characterized by a general lack of political resolve.

In a world in which peace and American security depend on American power and the will to use it, the main threat the United States faces now and in the future is its own weakness. American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order. The appropriate goal of American foreign policy, therefore, is to preserve that hegemony as far into the future as possible. To achieve this goal, the United States needs a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of military supremacy and moral confidence.

Given the previous lack of resolve, an appropriate response to the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. had to therefore go beyond mere retaliation to include a show of force commensurate with the threat.

Consistent with the view that global terrorism represented an existential threat, the Bush Administration quickly turned its focus toward Iraq following 9/11. While Iraq had been identified as a serious threat by successive US administrations, it had been the neoconservatives who most vocally and consistently called for regime change through force.

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438 Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*, 69. Fukuyama here presents the European interpretation of the significance of 9/11, a position for which he personally advocates in his book. We will turn our attention to this discussion at a later point in this chapter.

during the 1990s. 440 Saddam Hussein’s ambition for greater influence over a region of strategic import represented an obvious threat to the United States in accordance with the logic of Wolfowitz’s 1992 memo. 441 While the Gulf War neutered Iraq’s ability to project power beyond its borders for a considerable period of time, Wolfowitz, Kagan and Kristol, among others, remained deeply concerned about Saddam Hussein’s continued hold on power and his regime’s pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, specifically, nuclear weapons. 442 Neoconservatives worried that a policy of containment that relied on economic and diplomatic sanctions, together with periodic US bombing campaigns like Desert Fox, was unsustainable. Support for containment amongst members of the international community was weak, and violations were frequent. 443 This heightened the fear that Saddam Hussein’s pursuit of nuclear weapons might one day go unchecked. For neoconservatives, this meant one thing:

440 If Bob Woodward is to be believed, it was Paul Wolfowitz who first raised the matter of regime change in Iraq with President Bush in the days following 9/11. See Bob Woodward, *Bush At War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 83-85. According to Doug Feith in his new book, *War and Decision: Inside The Pentagon At The Dawn Of The War On Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008), the question of Iraq was raised first in a memo prepared by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice for the September 13th meeting at Camp David that put forth the option “to eliminate Iraqi threat” as one of three options to consider in response to the attacks on September 11th, 2001 (48).

441 Wolfowitz argued that the United States must “endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power.” The most effective means for ensuring that hostile powers do not take root in these regions is through the “spread of democratic forms of government and open economic systems.” Quotes are taken from “Keeping the US First: Pentagon Would Preclude a Rival Superpower,” *The Washington Post*, March 11, 1992.


The only acceptable strategy is one that eliminates the possibility that Iraq will be able to use or threaten to use weapons of mass destruction. In the near term, this means a willingness to undertake military action as diplomacy is clearly failing. In the long term, it means removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power. That now needs to become the aim of American foreign policy.444

Following 9/11, two more justifications for removing Saddam Hussein from power were put forward. First, there was the risk that a nuclear armed Iraq might collaborate with a terrorist organization like Al Qaeda, using them as a surrogate to attack the United States. Second, the 9/11 attacks were committed by nineteen men educated in a region overflowing with rampant anti-Americanism and borrowed anti-Semitism, officially sanctioned by a mixture of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. For neoconservatives and key members of the Bush Administration, it was imperative that the war on terror be understood in these broader moral, political and strategic terms; as something greater than mere retaliation against those who attacked the United States. After all, Afghanistan was simply a base of operations.445 In the process, what has become known as the Bush Doctrine threatened to turn sixty years of what its proponents derogatorily referred to as ‘status quo realism’ on its head.

444Letter to President William Clinton from the Project for the New American Century. The case for regime change in Iraq held considerable bi-partisan support before 9/11. With the signing of the Iraq Liberation Act 22 USC 2151 into law on October 31, 1998, regime change in Iraq became the standing policy of the US government.
The Case for War and the Bush Doctrine

The backdrop of a disastrous occupation and reconstruction effort in Iraq has altered for many their earlier aspirations for a quick and decisive outcome.446 The list of failures by the Bush Administration is long and includes mistakes that are, even with passage of time, baffling in their scope and predictability. A recent classified report prepared by RAND Corporation, and leaked to the New York Times, chronicled the now too familiar mistakes. Among the most damning, the report concluded that “there was never an attempt to develop a single national plan” for the occupation of Iraq following the invasion. This was exacerbated by the failure of President Bush and his national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, to “mediate” disputes between the State Department and the Pentagon. The disagreements between the two departments were “paper(ed) over” with what seems, in retrospect, like a cavalier, hope-for-the-best wishfullness.447 The report also chided the president for assuming that reconstruction efforts would be minimal. In what may help explain Wolfowitz’s thinking when he testified before Congress in the weeks preceding the invasion that General Shinseki’s call for more troops was “wildly off the mark,”448 the report


447“Army Buried Study Faulting Iraq Planning,” The New York Times, February 11, 2008. These criticisms are not new. For a critical review of the paucity of postwar planning by the Pentagon and the US State Department, see Michael Gordon, COBRA II (New York: Pantheon, 2006), specifically Chapter 8, “A Little Postwar Planning,” 138-163. Doug Feith offers a more detailed portrayal of the postwar planning process in War and Decision. He strenuously disagrees with Gordon’s account and the overall impression that little thought was given to a postwar Iraq. He argues persuasively that detailed plans for a quick transfer (no more than a few months) of power to an Iraqi Interim Authority (IIA) were formally endorsed by President Bush prior to the invasion. However, Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, with Secretary Rumsfeld’s acquiescence, abrogated this policy in favor of what became fourteen months of dysfunctional CPA rule. See, specifically, Chapter 9, “Iraq Planning – The Who And Why,” 274-298. Quote is in Feith, War and Decision, 250.

had this to say: “Building support for any pre-emptive or preventative war is inherently challenging, since by definition, action is being taken before the threat has fully manifested itself. Any serious discussion of the costs and challenges of reconstruction might undermine efforts to build that support.” Perhaps Wolfowitz and the president truly believed that occupation and reconstruction would be inexpensive and a relatively easy undertaking, but the facts on the ground have shown this to appear naïve, or worse, in hindsight. Lastly, what is most perplexing of all is that the idealistic rhetoric of the President was not met by a commensurate presence of American troops.449

In the winter of 2003, the case for war in Iraq looked very different. The shock of 9/11 was still palpable throughout the United States; the success of the CIA and the Pentagon’s war plan for Afghanistan, with its emphasis on a small US military footprint, was widely praised; and intelligence gathered in Afghanistan exposed the truly global reach of Al Qaeda. These developments underpinned the neoconservative case for war.450 If we move beyond the colossal mistakes on the ground in Iraq, we find many serious and good faith arguments in favor of regime change and preemption. The debate surrounding the decision to invade is especially relevant to our study as it pitted realists, of both the Brent Scowcroft

449According to Richard Perle, this division was permitted for so long because the president “did not make decisions”. “At the end of the day, you have to hold the president responsible.” Quoted in “Neo-Culpa,” Vanity Fair. Yet another source of debate will involve the quality of the military’s leadership and the best structure for US armed forces in a world where the policies of the US government require substantial nation-building effort. See, for example, Lt. Col. Paul Yingling, “A failure in generalship,” Armed Forces Journal, May, 2007. Located at http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198.

450Several neoconservatives had strong reservations regarding the proposed number of troops by the Pentagon for post-invasion Iraq. They viewed the number as woefully inadequate but, given the success of Afghanistan, there was a belief that Secretary Rumsfeld should be given the benefit of the doubt.
and John Mearsheimer variety, against neoconservatives and members of the Bush Administration.451

The case for war borrowed heavily from the Bush Doctrine, which stands as an achievement of neoconservative principles.452 The doctrine’s repudiation of moral relativism, its emphasis on preemption, US exceptionalism and the promotion of democracy are, when packaged together, consistent with all of the neoconservative thinkers we have reviewed thus far. Neoconservatives also lent their skill for political argument to make the case to the American people, Congress and to the various centers of elite opinion in the foreign policy community. For neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz, 9/11 was the Pearl Harbor of this generation and, similarly, it marked the beginning of a new world order necessitating the adoption of a similarly bold doctrinal response.453

Podhoretz identifies four pillars to the Bush Doctrine. The first is “the repudiation of moral relativism and an entirely unapologetic assertion of the need for and the possibility of moral judgment in the realm of foreign affairs.”454 When on September 20, 2001 President Bush spoke in terms “waging this struggle for freedom and security of the American people,” the Bush Doctrine’s idealism rested, as did the Reagan Doctrine twenty

451Proponents of the war also received support from a scant few liberal internationalists like Kenneth Pollack, Michael Ignatieff and Thomas Freedman.


453While many neoconservatives disagree with Podhoretz’s sweeping claims that the United States is now engaged in World War IV with radical Islam, his interpretation of the Bush Doctrine’s moral, political and strategic claims are consistent with the views of most. For example, Charles Krauthammer and Richard Perle tend to view the war on terror as a battle against radical Islam or Islamafascists. See Charles Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism,” The National Interest, Fall, 2004. Others like Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan tend not to view the war on terror in such apocalyptic terms.

years earlier, on a belief in a universal moral truth. A belief in universal truth amounted to a direct challenge of realism, according to Podhoretz, for realists are unrealistic about the virtues of free societies in a liberal world. Quoting President Bush’s speech to the Air Force Academy on June 2, 2004:

Some who call themselves realists question whether the spread of democracy in the Middle East should be of any concern of ours. But the realists in this case have lost contact with a fundamental reality: America has always been less secure when freedom is in retreat; America is always more secure when freedom is on the march.

The second pillar rests on the belief that terrorism was not merely a symptom of poverty but a consequence of political oppression and the only way to diminish its appeal was through wholesale political change. The belief that terrorism was, and is, a function of political oppression and the brainwashing that naturally ensues when people live under despotic regimes is a radical one for many, according to Podhoretz. Addressing this problem honestly meant embracing a policy of regime change toward some of the world’s most repressive regimes. For it is only by “draining” the “swamps” of “political oppression” “through a policy of regime change” that the United States could make itself “safe from the threat of terrorism and simultaneously gave the peoples of ‘the entire Islamic world’ the ‘freedoms they want and deserve.’”

Following the policy of regime change came the most controversial pillar of the Bush Doctrine, the right of preemption. By positioning the right of preemption as central to its

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455 Ibid.
456 Ibid, 120.
457 Ibid, 123. Internal quotes are from President Bush.
doctrine, the Bush Administration turns on its head sixty years of deterrence theory. It abandons classic deterrence theory for the simple reason that “deterrence - the promise of massive retaliation against nations - means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend.”

The nexus between despotic regimes like Iraq, North Korea and Iran, their pursuit of nuclear and bio-chemical weapons, and their support of terrorist organizations with whom they may be sympathetic or share a common enemy (the United States), was the catalyst for the Bush Administration’s assertion of a right to preemption.

It was the combination of the second and third pillars of the Bush Doctrine that, for Podhoretz, explains and justifies the decision to invade Iraq. These two pillars follow from a shared belief with liberal internationalists that liberal societies are unlikely to war against one another because the ends of liberalism are for the advancement of human freedom and not the personal ambitions of a country’s leaders. The immediate objective of an invasion was to deny Saddam Hussein’s regime the ability to acquire nuclear weapons. But for Podhoretz, and neoconservatives generally, “the long-range strategic rationale went beyond the proximate causes of the invasion.”

Bush’s idea was to extend the enterprise of “draining the swamps” begun in Afghanistan and then to set the entire region on a course toward democratization. For if Afghanistan under the Taliban represented the religious face of Middle Eastern terrorism, Iraq under Saddam Hussein was its most powerful secular partner.

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458 Quote from President Bush’s speech at West Point on June 1, 2002.

459 The fourth pillar of the Bush Doctrine has to do with recasting the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in terms of the larger Arab-Israeli conflict. By understanding the conflict thus, much of the “old sympathy” for Israel might be renewed and the war on terror would be properly seen as one against the larger Muslim world as a whole. Recasting the fight as one against the whole of the Muslim world, as noted before, goes beyond what many of Podhoretz’s neoconservative colleagues support.
It was to deal with this two-headed beast that a two-pronged strategy was designed.\(^{460}\)

The appeal of these arguments, in particular the third pillar regarding the right of preemption, rested securely on the premise that the United States possessed the military power to overthrow Saddam Hussein’s regime with relative ease. The invasion itself was going to be, in the words of Ken Adelman, a “cakewalk.”\(^{461}\) As such, the most abstract argument in favor of war - that replacing a totalitarian regime in the center of the Middle East with a more liberal, representative form of government would have the salutary benefit of moderating Muslim extremism by way of a positive example\(^{462}\) - was understood to be worth the effort.

The case for war was subject to scathing criticisms before and after the invasion. The threat assessment of Iraq’s nuclear and bio-chemical capabilities, and the risk that such weapons could be handed to Al Qaeda or other terrorists, has, in the aftermath of the failure to discover any such weapons, been packaged by some critics into a larger ‘war as lie’ narrative.\(^{463}\) While many of the claims by President Bush and members of his administration

\(^{460}\)Podhoretz, 128. It is important to note that for neoconservatives like Doug Feith, Podhoretz’s emphasis has the effect of tying regime change too closely to democratization, as if the two go hand in hand. For Feith, as we will see, the primary reason for removing Saddam Hussein’s regime is because of the threat it posed to the United States. What follows a US invasion of Iraq is of secondary importance and was not a key determinant in the decision to invade, according to Feith.

\(^{461}\)Adelman argued in a \emph{Washington Post} op-ed that “liberating Iraq would be a cakewalk” for four reasons: “1. it was a cakewalk last time; 2. they’ve become much weaker; 3. we’ve become much stronger; 4. now we’re playing for keeps.” Quoted in Thomas E. Ricks, \emph{Fiasco: The American Military adventure In Iraq} (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 36.

\(^{462}\)This argument was by no means put forth solely by neoconservatives. See, for example, Fareed Zakaria, “Why Do They Hate Us?,” \emph{Newsweek}, October 15, 2001.

\(^{463}\)This narrative has been spun by those unsatisfied that the failure of the occupation of Iraq represented the incompetence of the Bush Administration and looked, instead, for duplicity and cover-up. As a representative example, see Seymour Hersh, “Selective Intelligence,” \emph{The New Yorker}, May 12, 2003. See also Patrick J. Buchanan, \emph{Where the Right Went}
were downright alarmist – in particular the claim that concrete evidence of Iraq’s nuclear capability might one day come in the “form of a mushroom cloud”\textsuperscript{464} - the belief that Iraq possessed bio-chemical weapons and an on-going nuclear weapons program represented the consensus view of US intelligence services going back to the first Clinton Administration.\textsuperscript{465} Wolfowitz somewhat clumsily summed up the consensus in a 2005 interview with \textit{Vanity Fair} when he said that it was “for bureaucratic reasons (that the United States) settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction, because it was the one reason everyone could agree on.”\textsuperscript{466}

Accordingly, among the many arguments that have been adduced by critics for not invading Iraq, the most substantive accepted the consensus regarding Iraq’s WMD and opposed the war instead on more substantive grounds: as (a) a failure to understand the

\textsuperscript{464}President Bush’s speech on October 7, 2002 in Cincinnati. The risk of a nuclear attack on the United States is by no means absurd as Graham Allison makes clear in \textit{Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe} (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2004). What makes Bush’s comment alarmist is his claim that Iraq posed this threat in the very near term.

\textsuperscript{465}For the most complete record of what was said, and by whom, in the years prior to the war in Iraq, see \textit{Iraq: Setting the Record Straight, A Report of the Project for the New American Century, April, 2005}, located at \texttt{http://www.newamericancentury.org/publicationsreports.htm}. The case for war was not based on new clandestine information uncovered in the months following 9/11; it was based on the consensus opinion in place since at least 1995 with the defection of the Iraqi Lieutenant General Hussein Kamal to Jordan. Kamal was a senior member of Saddam Hussein’s regime and a central figure in Iraq’s WMD programs. He worked closely with Saddam Hussein’s son, Qusay, on concealment of the regime’s WMD programs. Kamal provided information on the extent to which Iraq had concealed its ongoing WMD program from international inspectors as well as Iraq’s efforts to enrich uranium in August 1990 so as to weaponize a missile for use against Israel in the event of war. Much of Kamal’s information was confirmed by the government of Saddam Hussein as it tried to preemptively demonstrate to UN inspectors that Kamal had acted alone. This episode severed the remaining trust that UN inspectors had retained for the Iraqis on the question of WMD. See Kenneth Pollack, \textit{The Threatening Storm} (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2002), 76-77.

\textsuperscript{466}Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz Interview with Sam Tannenhaus, \textit{Vanity Fair}, May 9th, 2003, located at \texttt{http://www.defenselink.mil/cgi-bin/dlprint.cgi?http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2003/tr20030509-depsecdef0223.html}. This is not to suggest that the Bush Administration was innocent of ‘sexying up’ the hard evidence to support an invasion such as the ‘mushroom cloud’ comment or the assertion that Iraq had procured yellow cake uranium from Niger suggests. See, for example, “Bush and Iraq: The Yellow Cake Road,” \textit{Time}, Wednesday, July 9, 2003.
underlying logic of deterrence or (b) the result of a misguided and imprudent idealism regarding the potential benefits of regime change.

Reading Saddam: Madman or Rational Self-Maximizer

The argument for invading Iraq hinged in large part on the belief that should Iraq acquire nuclear weapons it could not be adequately deterred from using them, from transferring the technology to a terrorist organization like Al Qaeda, or leveraging the power they bestowed to blackmail the United States and the West into making painful concessions in a strategically important region of the world. The United States had a long history of dealing with Saddam Hussein’s ambition for regional influence, including his dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons and his use of bio-chemical weapons against Iran and his own people. In this sense, then, Saddam Hussein’s intentions were well known. And yet realists and neoconservatives disagreed about the extent to which his regime could be deterred. Generally speaking, could a leader of a country knowingly act in a way that led logically to his death or that of his regime? If one answers yes, why, then, should the United States run the risks of pursuing the policy of containment advocated by realists like Brent Scowcroft and John Mearsheimer? Once more, the diverging opinions split along similar

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467On this point, many critics suggested that the Administration was fabricating a connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda that it knew to be incorrect. The documentary evidence, however, supports the fear prevalent in the months after 9/11 that such a partnership might prove politically expedient enough for both groups to overcome their mutual animosity. See The 9-11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004), 61. According to the Report, Osama bin Laden initiated contact with Iraqi officials, however, by the late 1990s, the “situation reversed” and Iraq was initiating contact with Al Qaeda; see also, Iraq: Setting the Record Straight, Section VIII; and Stephen F. Hayes, “Case Closed: The U.S. government’s secret memo detailing cooperation between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden,” Weekly Standard, November 24, 2003. See also, Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Great Terror,” The New Yorker, March 25, 2002, on reports regarding the triangular relationship between Iraq, Ansar Al-Islam, a terrorist group based in northern Iraq, and Al Qaeda.
lines, with neoconservatives emphasizing the weaknesses of containment and realists in general agreement regarding its strength.

Neoconservatives were not the only ones doubtful of the prospects of deterring a nuclear-armed Saddam Hussein. Kenneth Pollack, a former member of the Clinton Administration and a scholar at the Brookings Institution, more aligned with liberal internationalism than neoconservatism, provided, arguably, the most persuasive cases for abolishing the policy of containment and invading Iraq. He based his case not on a belief that Saddam Hussein was “irrational” or “suicidal” but on a twenty year pattern of being “politically out of touch with reality.” As a leader, Saddam Hussein demonstrated a “propensity to take colossal risks” because he routinely “distorts facts and probabilistic outcomes to suit what he wants to have happen.” History is not always a good guide for predicting future action, but in the case of Iraq, the “endless series of foreign policy fiascos” that were then followed by retreat, humiliation and renewed aggression paint a compelling portrait of a leader detached. Pollack highlights a few examples: in 1974, Iraqi forces moved against ethnic Kurds in violation of the March Manifesto knowing full well that a better armed Iran would likely respond with force (they did and Iraqi forces were forced to retreat in humiliation); the decision to invade Iran in 1980, based on the erroneous belief that the new government in Iran would quickly crumble, led to eight years of war with heavy costs to Iraq; the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was met with a massive US and international armed response; the decision not to withdraw from Kuwait in the months following the Iraqi invasion ended in a slaughter of the Iraqi armed forces by the US military, a fiasco that could easily have led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime; the decision not to come clean
on the matter of WMD during the 1990s led to prolonged sanctions which cost Iraq hundred of billions of dollars in lost oil revenue.\(^{468}\)

Pollack concludes from these military failures “that (Saddam Hussein) takes actions that he does not realize to be suicidal when he takes them and often does not realize that they are suicidal until it is too late to avert disaster.” His actions went unchecked and he was permitted to repeat fiasco after fiasco because there were “no political restraints” to his behavior. Unlike the Soviet Union, there was no politburo to pressure him; instead, he was surrounded by “yes-men” who contradicted him at their own peril. Moreover, he was paranoid about internal dissent. Many of his foreign policy fiascos were necessary, in his mind, to thwart the efforts of his political enemies inside Iraq. Pollack notes another peculiar psychological trait of Saddam Hussein’s: the threat of force had always been insufficient to persuade him to back down, even in the face of overwhelming odds. In the political culture of Saddam’s Iraq, “it is necessary to suffer damage before backing down - the threat of damage is not enough.”\(^{469}\) Shame and humiliation were the greater fears. The only deterrent for this type of behavior was the actual use of force. This last point was the most troubling and one that neoconservatives had also observed of Arab psychology generally, namely, that they respect power above other considerations. As Charles Krauthammer is reported to have once said, “if you want to win their hearts and minds, you have to grab a lower part of their anatomy and squeeze hard.”\(^{470}\)


\(^{469}\)Ibid., 255.

Pollock’s thesis was similar to the arguments made by neoconservatives before and after the invasion. His description of Saddam Hussein’s behavior justified, in their opinion, the right of preemption. For neoconservatives and the Bush Administration, the case for invading Iraq came down not to the imminence of the threat - for most observers did not believe that Saddam Hussein’s regime possessed a nuclear bomb in the Spring of 2003 - but rather to the fact that there existed a narrowing window of opportunity that, once shut, would limit the options for the West and the United States. Once Iraq possessed a nuclear weapon, the question of Saddam Hussein’s rationality would be beside the point as the time for action would have passed. As Bill Kristol and Lawrence Kaplan wrote prior to the war, “armed with nuclear weapons, a rational Saddam could just as easily deter us from responding to his provocations as an irrational Saddam.” 471

The attacks on September 11th demonstrated to neoconservatives and other proponents of the war in Iraq that the United States faced an unorthodox threat of terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction who receive safe haven from a failed or rogue state. Thus while it is “virtually impossible to deter states that would use terrorist groups as ‘cutouts’ to deliver weapons,” it is definitively impossible to deter an adversary “bent on suicide.” 472 This was the new reality confronting the United States and the West. And it justified a policy of preemption against failed regimes with leaders who are either irrational or simply “politically out of touch with reality.” The imperative of deterrence provides a “clear and legitimate right to take decisive action without waiting to be absolutely certain that


472Ibid., 84.
such an attack is about to be unleashed.”473 The right of individual and collective self-defense as contained in Article 51 of the United Nations charter belongs to the world of Pearl Harbor, not to a post-9/11 world. In this new strategic environment, the United States must act preemptively or risk losing the option to act at all.

The Realist Reaction

Realists reacted sharply to the case for war. Foreign policy realists like Brent Scowcroft and academic realists (neorealists) like John Mearsheimer and Robert Jervis found the neoconservative argument that Iraq could only be deterred through preemptive force to be “not only wrong but unusually misguided.”474 Realists argued that neoconservatives were wrong about two essential points. They were wrong, first, about the effectiveness of non-lethal forms of deterrence and, second, they were wrong about how states tend to behave in the international system. The first argument relied upon a half a century of deterrence theory, reaching back to the writings of Bernard Brodie at the onset of the nuclear age. The second argument put forth a very specific conception of state and individual behavior. The dispute between realism and neoconservatism “was between two competing theories of international politics,” Mearsheimer contended,475 and it exposed just how differently each theory approached matters of deterrence, diplomacy, human and state behavior and, ultimately, the causes of war.

In dismantling the case for war, realists challenged the very primacy of the Iraqi threat. Mearsheimer, Jervis and Scowcroft shared a belief that Iraq did not pose a threat sufficient to justify a US invasion. While it was true that Saddam Hussein had a history of starting wars, “Saddam’s record is no worse than that of his neighboring states such as Egypt and Israel,” according to Mearsheimer.476 Mearsheimer and Jervis disputed Pollack’s description of Saddam as “unintentionally suicidal,” seeing instead strategic reasons for Iraq’s invasions of Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990.

The historical evidence unequivocally demonstrated for these realists that Saddam Hussein could be deterred. This meant that “diplomacy, shifting alliances, inducements, and compromises, all coupled with threats” could have swayed Iraq to behave in a manner consistent with the long term interests of the United States. Even if one granted that Saddam Hussein was evil and as such represented a serious threat, the structure of the international system together with the clear superiority in military power of the United States made it probable that the threat could have been contained. As Jervis observed, “it is clearly a mistake to jump from the fact that Saddam is evil to the conclusion that his possession of WMD threatens the US and world peace.” This was a mistake, Jervis maintained, invoking Waltz, because “the spread of nuclear weapons will bring stability, regardless of the characteristics of the regime and its leaders.”477

Realists, almost to a theorist, believed that while Saddam Hussein was a brutal tyrant he was also a “power-hungry survivor” and thus his risk-taking was perceived to be


calculated and measured. Unlike the leader described by Kenneth Pollack as someone “politically out of touch with reality,” Mearsheimer saw a strategic thinker, someone with whom the United States could have done (and once did do) business. Reading the historical record accordingly, Mearsheimer described Iraq’s decision to attack Iran as far from being the “fiasco” Pollack saw. Rather, it was “an opportunistic response to a significant threat.”

Ayatollah Khomeini’s Iran, following its surprising rise to power in 1979, was intent on extending its revolution across the Islamic world. Given Iran’s relative power in the region, this represented an unacceptable threat to Iraq. Iraq’s response was thus nothing more than a weaker state’s effort to resist “the hegemonic aspirations of its stronger neighbor,” even if the weaker power knew it could not win. Iraq’s decision to attack Kuwait in 1990 further underscored Saddam Hussein’s reasonableness. In Mearsheimer’s words, the invasion of Kuwait “was neither mindlessly aggressive nor particularly reckless.”

The attack was “an attempt to deal with Iraq’s continued vulnerability,” caused in part by Kuwait’s behavior, specifically, its refusal to loan Iraq additional money following its long war with Iran, forgive existing loans, and its overproduction of oil in contravention of quotas established by OPEC. Moreover, the decision to invade Kuwait was made with the acquiescence of the United States or, at a minimum, as a result of confused signals coming out of Washington.

While the decision not to withdraw from Kuwait in the months preceding the attack by the United States in January 1991 was an evident mistake, it was an understandable one:

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480 Ibid. Quote is from the analyst, Efraim Karsh.

Saddam undoubtedly miscalculated when he attacked Kuwait, but the history of warfare is full of cases where leaders have misjudged the prospects for war. No evidence suggests Hussein did not weigh his options carefully, however. He chose to use force because he had good reasons to think his invasion would not provoke serious opposition. 482

Neoconservatives who argued that Saddam Hussein’s historical behavior demonstrated that he was undeterrable missed the larger point that “deterrence did not fail (in August 1990); it was never tried.” In those instances where deterrence has been tried – and the policy of containment provided ample evidence – “deterrence has worked well… and there is no reason to think that it cannot work equally well in the future.” 483

On the matter of nuclear weapons, Saddam Hussein’s pursuit of this technology was for obvious strategic reasons. “He seeks weapons of mass destruction not to arm terrorists, but to deter us from intervening to block his aggressive designs,” Scowcroft wrote. 484 For realists, proponents of the invasion who argued that a nuclear armed Iraq could proceed to blackmail the United States or “surreptitiously slip a nuclear weapon to Al Qaeda” hold a poor grasp of the logic of deterrence. So confident was Mearsheimer in the effectiveness of deterrence that he boldly predicted that “none of the nightmare scenarios invoked by preventive-war advocates are likely to happen.” 485

482 Ibid. This included the now famous comment by then US Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, that the United States has “no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflict, like your border disagreement with Kuwait.”

483 Mearsheimer, “An unnecessary War,” 54. Jervis made a similar point regarding Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds in the 1980s: “His use of poison gas against Iran and the Kurds was also normal in the sense of being risk-free and, in the former case, driven by military necessity and tacitly approved by the United States.” Jervis, 323.

484 Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam.”

Consider, for instance, the charge that a nuclear armed Iraq could have blackmailed the United States. For the threat of blackmail to have credibility, according to Mearsheimer, the target state could not possess nuclear weapons. “If the blackmailer and the target state both have nuclear weapons, however, the blackmailer’s threat is an empty one because the blackmailer cannot carry out the threat without triggering his own destruction.” But what about nuclear weapons providing cover for a renewed policy of military expansion by Iraq? What would happen if a nuclear armed Iraq had invaded Kuwait for a second time? Wouldn’t this have reduced the options for the United States, forcing it to cede regional influence? “Again, this threat is not credible,” according to Mearsheimer and Jervis. It wasn’t credible because if Iraq were to use nuclear weapons against the United States in the event that the United States forcibly expelled Iraqi troops in a repeat of Desert Storm, “(Saddam Hussein) would certainly bring nuclear warheads down on his own head. Given the choice between withdrawing or dying, he would almost certainly choose the former.”

Jervis agreed. “At its worst, mutual deterrence…could prevail, and while this might permit an initial Iraqi adventure, it could equally permit an American conventional response with little fear that Iraq could escalate.”

Mearsheimer did not directly address the deterrent effect that a nuclear armed Iraq would have on the United States, but Jervis did. Jervis acknowledged the obvious when he observed that “Saddam would not be trying to acquire them if he did not believe they would do him some good.” Nuclear weapons could have easily served as a regime-preserving mechanism for Saddam Hussein. Nuclear weapons “would make an American invasion

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486Ibid. My italics.

487Jervis, 324.
unlikely, and the US probably would not dare overthrow him even if he undertook major provocations, including invading his neighbors."\textsuperscript{488} This would, at a minimum, therefore, reduce the range of options available to the United States and increase the options available to Saddam Hussein. One need not have interpreted Saddam Hussein’s psychology as did Pollack and the neoconservatives to believe that Saddam Hussein might have become more comfortable taking bigger gambles than he did in the past if he possessed nuclear weapons. Could not such a gamble include an invasion of the Gulf emirates or Saudi Arabia? Would it have been rational for the United States to remain as sanguine as Mearsheimer and Jervis in the face of these potential risks to such a strategically important region?  

What about a surreptitious transfer of nuclear weapons or other WMD to Al Qaeda? The likelihood of this happening was believed to be “extremely small,” according to Mearsheimer\textsuperscript{489} To transfer nuclear weapons to Al Qaeda would have been a very risky proposition because “Saddam does not have to be certain the United States would retaliate to be wary of giving his nuclear weapons to al Qaeda; he merely has to suspect it.” In sum, “Saddam cannot afford to guess wrong.”\textsuperscript{490} This logic “explains why he did not use WMD against U.S. forces in the Gulf War.”\textsuperscript{491} Scowcroft puts forth a similar argument when he writes that “Saddam's goals have little in common with the terrorists who threaten us, and

\textsuperscript{488}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{489}Mearsheimer, “An Unnecessary War,” 58. My italics.  
\textsuperscript{490}Ibid., 58.  
\textsuperscript{491}Ibid., 56. Robert Lieber provides some interesting background to this supposed display of deterability by Saddam Hussein. Iraq was warned in a letter by US Secretary of State, James Baker, prior to the Gulf War that Iraq would face “devastating consequences” should it employ WMD against US troops. While Iraq complied with this as Waltz cites, Iraq ignored Baker's other warning in the letter not to support terrorist acts and not to destroy Kuwait’s oil fields. See Lieber, 19.
there is little incentive for him to make common cause with them.”  

However, if Mearsheimer is correct that “the history of warfare is full of cases where leaders have misjudged the prospects for war,” how could he have been so certain about what Saddam Hussein might have done? And how could Scowcroft, a man as familiar with the Iraqi’s regime’s ties to terrorism as anyone, be so confident that Saddam Hussein would never make common cause with Al Qaeda? This confidence is especially questionable in light of the strategic partnership between former regime elements and Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia during the bloodiest parts of the insurgency in post-war Iraq.

Mearsheimer, Jervis and Scowcroft shared the view that, more than anything else, Saddam Hussein was motivated by his own survival and therefore there were discernible limits to his risk-taking. As Mearsheimer noted, effective deterrence “only takes a leader who wants to stay alive and who wants to remain in power.” For neoconservatives, however, Saddam Hussein was a “pathological risk-taker” whose behavior undermined the logic of deterrence as applied to the Cold War because the Soviets were “fundamentally rational actors, and conservative ones at that.” Theories of deterrence between nuclear states unavoidably come down to the desire for survival on behalf of both parties, and the case of Iraq was no different. To argue that Saddam Hussein fit the mold of a rational actor ultimately concerned with his own survival was to put forth a truncated view of human nature; it was the equivalent of saying that, when push comes to shove, all human beings will

492 Brent Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam.”
493 Ibid., 54
494 For Iraq’s ties to Al Qaeda, see fn 50 above.
496 Kristol & Kaplan, The War Over Iraq, 81.
care for their own survival above all else and will therefore act reasonably. It also compels
the theorist to interpret history in a manner consistent with this assumption such that
carelessness is seen as accidental and not pathological.

**Balancing, Bandwagoning and Other Features of the International System**

In fairness, Mearsheimer was confident that there was more to restrain a tyrant like
Saddam Hussein than merely the profound human desire for self-preservation. His
confidence came from his understanding of the structure of the international system and the
behavior of states. In an international system without a central governing body, realists
believe that states tend to operate according to the logic of “balancing,” whereas
neoconservatives, looking at the same situation, tend to believe that states operate according
to the logic of “bandwagoning.” According to Mearsheimer, neoconservatives held that if
the United States employed its powerful military to change regimes in Iraq, “then virtually all
of the states in the system would understand that the United States means business and if
they cross the mighty Uncle Sam, they will pay a high price.” To the warning made by
realists prior to the war that an invasion of Iraq would only compel the other members of
the Axis of Evil, North Korea and Iran, to redouble their efforts at procuring nuclear
weapons, neoconservatives scoffed. According to Mearsheimer, they believed that North
Korea and Iran would “jump on the American bandwagon rather than risk death.” Closely
aligned with the logic of bandwagoning is the domino theory that underpinned US
involvement in Vietnam. According to that theory, if the United States failed in Vietnam,
then other countries in the region would succumb to the spread of communism.
Mearsheimer accused the Bush Administration and neoconservatives of trying to turn the logic of bandwagoning and the domino theory “to its advantage” in Iraq. 497

Closely tied to this bandwagoning logic of neoconservatism was what Mearsheimer called the revolution in military affairs (RMA). It is predicated on the concept of a lighter, more nimble and lethal US armed forces. A military with a smaller footprint that can quickly and easily overrun third-world regimes gave the logic of bandwagoning its deadly edge. “In sum,” according to Mearsheimer, “the RMA was supposed to make bandwagoning work, which, in turn, would make big-stick diplomacy work, which, in turn, would make a unilateralist foreign policy feasible.” 498 Furthermore, it gave the Wilsonian idealism of neoconservatism and their quest to make the world safe for democracy its requisite teeth. The combination of a preemptive invasion of Iraq with a lethal and nimble US military represented “social engineering on a massive scale and it was to be done with a mailed fist.” 499

For realists like Mearsheimer and Morgenthau states 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.” Realists also tend to think of the domino theory as “hooey.” “Like all realists, (Morgenthau) understood that we live in a balancing world and that the fall of Vietnam would not have a cascading effect in southeast Asia, much less across the entire globe.” The case of Iraq in 2003 was no different. The hope that an invasion of Iraq could


498 Ibid., 3. According to Mearsheimer, the logic of RMA explains Wolfowitz’s now famous testimony before the US Congress in February 2003.

499 Ibid.
strike fear in states like Iran and Syria to the point where they would acquiesce to American
demands was an example of wishful thinking.

The one thing most needful when discussing the effects of war, for realists, is an
appreciation for the power of nationalism. According to Mearsheimer, realists of every
stripe believe that it is nationalism and not democracy that is the passion which motivates
the average person. “The power of nationalism explains in good part why all of the great
European empires…are now the scrapheap of history.” It was therefore “foolish in the age
of nationalism” to think that the United States could spread democracy through force. So
powerful is nationalism, that even if “large-scale military forces” are committed to a
particular region - in contradiction to the logic of RMA - it is likely to “face a major-league
insurgency that would be difficult to beat.”

While Mearsheimer paints with too broad a brush in dismissing the logic of
bandwagoning and the domino theory (following the US defeat in Vietnam, South Vietnam,
Cambodia and Laos did fall like dominos), overstates the power of nationalism (those
European empires he brushes aside did last for several centuries before succumbing to the
power of nationalism), and underestimates the effectiveness of a counter-insurgency
campaign (there have been successful examples in past⁵⁰⁰), he does hit upon a key conceptual
difference between neoconservatives and realists. Neoconservatives do believe that power
matters and that, generally speaking, Arabs and their leaders tend to respect the actual use of
force as opposed to its mere threat (something Pollack noted as well). They also tend to
believe that the “only consistently compelling reason (for any) Muslim ruler in the Middle

⁵⁰⁰To cite but one example, US financed counter-insurgency campaigns in Latin America during the 1980s were
largely successful in breaking the back of the marxist inspired guerillas in El Salvador and Guatemala.
East to extend himself continuously and aggressively against al Qaeda is fear of American
power.” Despite this, neoconservatives tend to believe that the logic of bandwagoning and
balancing are equally probable of state and human behavior and that it is circumstance which
dictates their priority. International politics is not merely a function of colliding billiard
balls, as Mearsheimer contends; rather, in the words of Condoleezza Rice, “statecraft matters
in how it all comes out.”

An article by the historian Bernard Lewis entitled “We Must Be Clear” touched upon
this very issue. Bernard Lewis, while not a neoconservative himself, was friendly to many
neoconservatives and influential with members of the Bush Administration. In the days
following 9/11, he wrote that in the context of the dictatorships of the Middle East, “the law
of survival is very simple: Jump on the bandwagon. The problem that sometimes arises in
the more complex conditions of today is to identify the bandwagon in the traffic jam. A
wrong choice may in the most literal sense be fatal.” Given the congestion of Middle
Eastern politics, the primary need of the people in the region “is not to evaluate the policies
and purposes of dictators and terrorists, which they know well and understand accurately; it
is to understand the policies and purposes of the United States - a much more difficult task.”
What is needed by the United States is therefore “clarity in recognizing issues and
alignments, firmness and determination in defining and applying policy.”

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502 Nicolas Lemann, “The Next World Order,” The New Yorker, April 1, 2002, 44. For Rice’s pre-9/11 realist
503 Bernard Lewis, From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004),
370.
call for clarity echoes the argument made earlier by Wolfowitz regarding the importance of
principles in foreign policy.504

Neoconservatives believe that states and individuals are capable of acting in ways
that extend across the spectrum of what realists refer to as balancing and bandwagoning.
History provides plenty of examples of both. History also provides numerous examples of
suicidal or “unintentionally suicidal” behavior by despotic or tyrannical leaders. A policy
maker must of necessity be concerned with this entire spectrum of behavior; analytical
models that say otherwise provide cold comfort when confronted with the risks of the real
world. The decision to invade Iraq was, for neoconservatives, “based on judgments about
the costs of inaction, the benefits of action, and the strategic calculations that action would
be far preferable to action later in less favorable circumstances.”505 While the behavior of
other states was factored in - and there was a strong belief that if the United States acted
forcefully other states would revisit their behavior - it is unfair to apply the bandwagoning
label too broadly.

In the final analysis, Mearsheimer accused the neoconservatives of being “in the
business of selling a preventive war” and therefore “they must try to make remaining at
peace seem unacceptably dangerous.” This charge seems a bit of an overstatement. For
while there were many good reasons to suspect that Saddam Hussein could have been
deterred from developing, using or transferring nuclear weapons, the confidence with which
Mearsheimer argued his case was called into question by his own reluctance to state that

504 See Paul Wolfowitz, “Remembering the Future,” The National Interest, Spring, 2000, 41, on “The Importance of
Principle.”

Section VI.
such a threat was non-existent. His repeated references to the threats posed by Iraq as being “extremely small” or “(un)likely to happen” because Saddam Hussein could not have “afford(ed) to guess wrong” leave open a level of risk the magnitude of which others might reasonably disagree. After all, Mearsheimer admitted that Saddam Hussein was prone to gross miscalculations. How else to interpret his decision not to fully disclose his largely non-existent weapons programs before the US invasion in 2003?

The question therefore for neoconservatives was, in the aftermath of 9/11, should the United States run the risk? The answer to this question depended, in large part, on what one expected the outcome of the war to be, a cakewalk or a minefield? Scowcroft was emphatic that an invasion of Iraq “would not be a cakewalk;”506 Ken Adelman, most neoconservatives, and most members of the Bush Administration believed it would be. Given their confidence, were neoconservatives and the Bush Administration led to exaggerate the risks posed by Saddam Hussein and underestimate the challenges of occupation? In the final part of this chapter, we must consider Francis Fukuyama’s charge that neoconservatives became so drunk with success that they put aside their own skepticism regarding social engineering and advocated nation-building with a breezy casualness bordering on recklessness. This attitude speaks to a failure to consider the prudential case against the war. Among the most important of these were the risks of occupying a potentially hostile country and the law of unintended consequences. Given the disastrous occupation that has followed the invasion, we must reflect on the prudential case against invading Iraq. But, first, we must turn our attention to the case for regime change.

506 Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam.”
The Case for War and Regime Change

The belief that the US military could easily overthrow the Iraqi regime made it exceedingly difficult for neoconservatives to accept the risks associated with the status quo. Their confidence made them receptive to the notion that the US military could play a transformative role in removing the obstacles to a more representative government in Iraq. At first glance, this faith in the transformative role of the US military seems ironic for a group of men and women who have historically been suspect of government-led social engineering. Neoconservatives, not surprisingly, do not see it this way. They argue that their faith in the transformative role of American power has a long history in American foreign policy.

For neoconservatives, the Bush Doctrine represented a distinctly “American Internationalism” which struck a balance between strategy and morality, between realism and idealism. Moral idealism in American politics has very deep roots as Americans have never been comfortable with the raw pursuit or exercise of power. Americans have always been more comfortable pursing policies that reflected their moral aspirations and which, though dependent on the use of power, were not a consequence of its possession. While realists may scoff at the notion that power can be used in the furtherance of morality or that the use of power can itself be moral, for neoconservatives, this is what makes American foreign policy so different from the era of the machtpolitik of the great European powers. US military interventions since the end of World War II, whether it be Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War or

\[507\] For realists like John Mearsheimer idealist rhetoric by US politicians regarding their motives for military action is simply propaganda for domestic consumption. “Behind closed doors,” writes, “the elites who make national security policy speak mostly the language of power, not that of principle, and the United States acts in the international system according to the dictates of realist logic,” *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 25.
Iraq, have been justified on the basis of that uniquely American belief that its most cherished ideals are not only worth fighting for but can be successfully exported across borders. What President Bush has called “American Internationalism,” or what others have called “Democratic Realism,” and what I have argued is representative of neoconservatism, follows logically from the tradition of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism is based on the “belief in the uniqueness and the virtue of the American political system that, when translated into foreign policy terms, offers the United States as a model for the world. It is a model because faith in the universal ideal of freedom, not a blood-and-soil nationalism, is what defines the American idea.”

Faith in the notion of an America unencumbered by the messy nationalism and power politics of old Europe goes back to the birth of the American nation. In the words of the historian Robert Tucker:

> From the outset of our existence as a nation we have believed that our security and survival are synonymous with the security and survival of freedom in the world. This is why our reason of state has not only had a dimension above and beyond a conventional reason, but has been regularly seen as somehow qualitatively different from it.

The standard narrative of neoconservatism, as told in Chapters 1 and 2, holds that faith in American exceptionalism was forsaken during the 1970s under the auspices of Kissinger’s

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508 Charles Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism,” *The National Interest*, Fall, 2004, 16. “Democratic Realism” is the term he gives to his variant of neoconservatism. Krauthammer draws a distinction between his brand of neoconservatism and that of Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan. Krauthammer feels that Kristol and Kagan place too great an emphasis on the idealism of neoconservatism, and, accordingly, an insufficient emphasis on the realism or geopolitical necessity for intervention. Krauthammer, for instance, was opposed to the intervention in the Balkans in the late 1990s whereas Kristol and Kagan supported the policy. See 19.

509 Kaplan & Kristol, *The War over Iraq*, 64.

510 Ibid.
détente and Carter’s human rights liberalism. The ameliorating effects of American power gave way to a belief, shared in equal parts by Republicans and Democrats, that there were limits to American power and that therefore the United States must, in the words of Henry Kissinger, reject “any special rights in world affairs” and pursue instead a policy of “peaceful coexistence” where the United States is seen as but one member of the larger international community.511 What was lost following the war in Vietnam, according to this narrative, was quickly and successfully restored under President Reagan and with it a renewed faith in American exceptionalism and the benefits of US power. It is this self-conscious faith in the long tradition of American exceptionalism that distinguishes neoconservatism from realism and, to varying degrees, liberal internationalism.512

While neoconservatives share with realists a belief that the world is a dangerous place which frequently resembles a Hobbesian state of nature, neoconservatives believe that “the application of American power and ideals” can play the role of Hobbes’ sovereign and improve the lot of those parts of the world that fall under its influence.513 The absence of this belief is precisely why realism fails, according to neoconservatism. Realism’s emphasis on power limits its thought to a consideration of means. For Krauthammer, realism “fails because it offers no vision beyond power. It is all means and no ends.”514 Likewise for Wolfowitz, realism fails because it will not consider the importance of ideals in shaping foreign policy. “Nothing could be less realistic,” Wolfowitz wrote before 9/11, “than the

511Department of State Bulletin, June 26, 1972, 898-899. This represents Kissinger’s statement of the “Basic Principles” of détente.


513Kaplan & Kristol, The War over Iraq, 65.

versions of the ‘realist’ view of foreign policy that dismisses human rights as an important tool of American foreign policy.”

For realists like Morgenthau, Waltz and Mearsheimer, talk of American exceptionalism is either dangerously misguided or a cynical ploy to manipulate the American people to support policies that are at best amoral expressions of power. Realists tend to emphasize order and stability over ideology as the appropriate goals of a credible American foreign policy. In this context, realists evidence a deep concern about unsettling nationalistic forces that may otherwise remain contained. Following the Gulf War, for example, Brent Scowcroft, Colin Powell and others in the first Bush Administration advocated a neutral response by the United States to the nascent Iraqi uprisings lest it end up “trying to sort out two thousand years of Mesopotamian history.” Mearsheimer made a similar argument in 2003, arguing that it was “foolish in the age of nationalism” to think that the United States could spread democracy in the world.

The Bush Doctrine’s emphasis on American Internationalism and exceptionalism underpinned its policy of regime change and allowed it to put forth a novel concept to state sovereignty. The Bush Administration argued that there were limits to sovereignty and that the character of a regime influenced not only its treatment of its own citizens but also its behavior towards its neighbors and the world. These were principles that made for common


cause with some liberal internationalists. The impact of the idea that there were limits to sovereignty was described by Richard Haass in an interview in *The New Yorker*:

What you're seeing from this Administration is the emergence of a new principle or body of ideas about what you might call the limits of sovereignty. Sovereignty entails obligations. One is not to massacre your own people. Another is not to support terrorism in any way. If a government fails to meet these obligations, then it forfeits some of the normal advantages of sovereignty, including the right to be left alone inside your own territory. Other governments, including the United States, gain the right to intervene. In the case of terrorism, this can even lead to a right to preemptive, or preemptory, self-defense. You essentially act in anticipation if you have grounds to think it's a question of when, and not if, you're going to be attacked.

Saddam Hussein's regime abrogated these obligations of sovereignty and thus left itself politically and morally weakened to the Bush Administration's call for regime change. But on what basis did the Bush Administration and neoconservatives believe that a reprehensible regime might be replaced by a more benign one in a region that has only known the heavy hand of authoritarianism? While many neoconservatives were careful to note that a discussion about what came after Saddam Hussein was of secondary importance to the primacy of the threat posed by Iraq, once the decision to invade was made, it was necessary to consider an Iraq without Saddam Hussein. In thinking about what came next, neoconservatives strived to connect means and ends, between removing a threat and

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520In the words of Doug Feith, speaking before the war, “once you contemplate using military force…and you’re thinking about what do you do afterward, that’s when you can think that if we do things right, and if we help Iraqis, and if the Iraqis show an ability to create a humane representative government for themselves – will that have beneficial spillover effects on the politics of the region? The answer, I think, is yes.” Quote in Nicolas Lemann, “After Iraq,” *The New Yorker*, February 17 & 24, 2003. As we reviewed earlier, for Norman Podhoretz, the possibility that regime change would give rise to a more liberal Iraq were essential to the case for war.
establishing a lasting peace. For neoconservatives, the idea of spreading democracy - or the “institutions of democracy” in the words of Doug Feith\textsuperscript{521} - went to the core of the successful prosecution of the war on terror. The spread of democracy was believed to serve a strategic purpose as “fellow democracies provide the most secure alliances and most stable relationships” and therefore had ultimately “not just moral but geopolitical value.”\textsuperscript{522} But what made them believe that democracy could possibly succeed in Iraq? After all, would it not have been easier for the United States to simply replace one tyrant with a more benign one which was, in any case, the preferred solution of the CIA, according to Richard Perle?\textsuperscript{523}

The case for rising above what neoconservatives understand to be the cynicism of the CIA involved a particular reading of the history of anti-Americanism in the Middle East. The answer to the question posed by Bernard Lewis of “Why do they hate us so?” points in the direction of the repressive regimes that the United States had for decades viewed as friendly to US interests. For Richard Perle, the logic of Arab anger is straightforward:

The source of terror is predominately Islamist radicalism, and the recruiting ground for Islamic radicals has been the dictatorships of the Middle East. The logic chain is not complicated. Closed political systems like Egypt, like Saudi Arabia, like Jordan and others in the region, in fact, virtually all of the others in the region, breed discontented young men who are easily enticed to sacrifice their own lives in order to kill us. If we’re going to get the root causes of this terror, a significant root cause is the dictatorships of the Middle East.\textsuperscript{524}

\textsuperscript{521}“After Iraq,” 71. Feith draws a distinction between democracy and “institutions of democracy” because the latter “connotes that there’s a particular system that works for everybody, and I am too much a respecter of Burke to assert that.”

\textsuperscript{522}Charles Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism,” 17. Democratic realism is the term he gives to his variant of neoconservatism.

\textsuperscript{523}See the edited transcript from the Hudson Institute’s symposium on March 28, 2005 with the topic, “Foreign Policy Divisions on the Right: Are We All Neoconservatives Now?” Located at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb5554/is_200502/ai_n21846946

\textsuperscript{524}Ibid.
Neoconservatives read the history of the Middle East in a manner similar to Bernard Lewis and a select number of other historians before the war. Lewis had argued that the demise of what had once been “the greatest civilization on Earth” had left Arabs and Muslims filled with profound “frustration and anger at what seemed to them a reversal of both natural and divine law.” “The prime target of the resulting anger is, inevitably, the United States, now the unchallenged, if not unquestioned, leader of what we like to call the free world and what others variously define as the West, Christendom and the world of the unbelievers.”

Rubbing salt in the wound of the Arab pride is the fact that the United States has long referred to as friends regimes that are frequently the most repressive in the region where hatred of the United States and Israel is frequently the only form of expression permissible.

Arab hatred of the United States was surpassed, according to Lewis, only by the contempt for what many Arabs perceived as the “rampant immorality and degeneracy of the American way.” Osama bin Laden was masterful in exploiting this hatred and contempt as motivating tools for his army of suicide bombers. And the refrain was always the same: “Because of their depraved and self-indulgent way of life, Americans have become soft and cannot take casualties…Hit them and they will run.” The American response to a decade of terrorism in the 1990s - from first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 to the attack on the USS Cole in 2000 - was “only angry and empty words and at most, a few misdirected missiles.” According to Lewis, the neoconservatives and the Bush Administration, 9/11 was

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526 Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans*, 375.
The crimes of Sept. 11 were the result of this perception and were intended to be the opening salvo of a large-scale campaign to force Americans and their allies out of Arabia and the rest of the Muslim world, to overthrow the corrupt tyrants America supports, and to prepare the ground for the final world struggle.  

The brazen contempt that Al Qaeda showed for the United States in the attacks of 9/11 could be answered with the awesome power of the US military; the decades of hatred was not something, however, that power alone could change. To alter the political landscape of the Middle East required a rethinking of decades of realist thought that held that the United States should simply do business with the repressive regimes of the Middle East in an effort to avoid the unsettling effects of change. In opening themselves up to the possibility of implanting the seeds of democracy in Iraq, neoconservatives were, like Lewis, forced to embrace change. After all, “why should we feel threatened by such a change?,” Lewis asked. “The overwhelming evidence is that the majority of our terrorist enemies come from purportedly friendly countries, and their main grievance against us is that, in their eyes, we are responsible for maintaining the tyrannical regimes that rule over them.”

In the buildup to the invasion of Iraq, neoconservatives and the Bush Administration came to believe that the ethnic strife and divisions of Iraqi society could find expression in a more representative government. Disabusing themselves of the Bush Administration line that the occupation of Iraq was to be short and self-financed by the Iraqis, many neoconservatives understood that this was “certain to be a difficult process, one requiring an extensive

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527 Ibid., 376.

528 Ibid., 379.
American military presence over a protracted period of time.\textsuperscript{529} But, in the final analysis, 9/11 changed the tolerance level for the status quo and made the consequences of non-action appear more threatening than that of embracing change.

Yet the prospect of change was risky and unwelcomed by many Europeans as they feared that change was not going to be limited to the Middle East. A US invasion of Iraq brought with it the prospect of disrupting the existing liberal world order, a prospect that was deeply unsettling to countries like France and Germany. They feared the type of change that might result from a doctrine of preemption founded on the principle of US exceptionalism. The Bush Doctrine gave rise to an acute fear of an America unhinged from the quiet persuasion of Europe.

Thus as 2002 came to an end and the Bush Administration prepared for an invasion of Iraq, the right of preemption and the view that terrorism represented an existential threat distanced the Bush Administration from realists, liberal internationalists and many of its traditional allies. The distance created by the Bush Doctrine was so sharp that it ruptured for many the Western consensus that had established itself over the previous sixty years. Divisions appeared within the Bush Administration itself, between Bush \textit{père} and son, between realists, liberal internationalists, conservatives and neoconservatives and, eventually, between neoconservatives themselves. In the end, the rupture of consensus meant that the United States would invade Iraq without the legitimacy of world opinion; the fig leaf of the

\textsuperscript{529}Karsh, “Making Iraq Safe for Democracy,” 29.
“coalition of the willing” in its place gave comfort only if one “abstract(ed) from the quality of the support (the US) received,” Francis Fukuyama later observed.530

From Mars to Venus: Hobbes, Kant, Europe and America

European allies made three substantive objections to a US invasion of Iraq. Like the realists above, many European nations simply disagreed with the threat assessment of Iraq. They understood the threat of Iraq’s pursuit of nuclear weapons to be more localized and containable. As for the threat posed by Iraq’s ties to radical Islamic terrorism, this too they understood to be tenuous at best, and for good reason, as Saddam Hussein’s regime was antithetical to the aspiration of Islamic fundamentalism. Simply put, European critics simply did not find credible the Bush Administration’s fear that a nuclear-armed Iraq might surreptitiously transfer such weapons to Al-Qaeda or others. Many European nations like France and Germany saw the Iraqi threat, and indeed the threat of Islamic terrorism, to be substantially less existential than the Americans. The attacks of 9/11 were not interpreted as the game-changing event that it was for neoconservatives and the Bush Administration. Islamic terrorism was indeed a real threat, but it represented more a reaction to modernity and globalization, as well as an expression of historical grievances with American policies in the region,531 than it did the virulent kind of threat described by neoconservatives like


531Europeans have frequently pointed to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the unequivocal US support for Israel, as explanatory of Arab hostility toward the United States and the West. Recent scholarship by some realists have furthered the argument that the suicide attacks by Al Qaeda on the United States and the West is not religiously inspired but rather nationalistic in origin, blaming “the root cause of suicide terrorism” on “foreign occupation and the threat that foreign military presence poses to the local community’s way of life.” See Robert Pape, Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism (New York: Random House, 2006), 245.
Krauthammer and Podhoretz - the kind that was “grounded in a venerable religion” and which had “a long and deep tradition of zeal, messianic expectation and a cult of martyrdom.”532 This more benign interpretation of the root causes of Islamic terrorism made 9/11 appear more like a “surprisingly successful one-of-a-kind event” than a direct challenge to the principle of national self-defense as embodied in Charter 51 of the UN.533 Secondly, in making their case against a US invasion, Europeans affirmed a normative belief in the need for multilateralism and international law as foundational to the maintenance of a liberal world order, one that was threatened by the principle of US exceptionalism. Lastly, European critics of the war raised prudential considerations regarding the wisdom of a preemptive invasion given the risks inherent to the task of nation-building.

Many supporters of the Bush Administration sought to dismiss European criticism as, alternatively, the perfidiousness of the French, the obsession of liberal internationalists with the United Nations and the legitimacy it confers or, simply, a visceral personal dislike of the President himself. Neoconservatives went a bit further. While they acknowledged the principled objection by Europeans to the Bush Administration’s estimation of the Iraqi threat, their disagreement quickly reached an impasse as it stemmed from a wholly different set of assumptions that did not allow for compromise. The prudential case against the war, however, solicited very little commentary from neoconservatives and, according to their critics, it is not clear that it registered at all. Instead, neoconservatives explained the reaction in Europe as more the result of a philosophical divide regarding the strategic application of power that had grown out of the political experiences of post-war Europe. Relatedly, for

532Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism.”

533Fukuyama, America at the Crossroads, 69.
neoconservatives, this philosophic divide included normative questions regarding legitimacy in the international arena. In earlier chapters, we explored the philosophical differences regarding strategic matters between neoconservatives and their political opponents in the United States. The divide between the United States and Europe was no less profound. As Robert Kagan summarized in the summer of 2002, “on major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus.”

In *Power and Weakness*, Kagan examines the question of why Europeans and Americans no longer shared what he called a common “strategic culture.” When confronted by a threat of the type presented by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the United States was much more likely to favor military action as a solution whereas Europeans, with the notable exception of the British, were more inclined to favor diplomacy. The very focus on “threats” by US officials - the threat posed by nuclear weapons and rogues states, for example - distanced them from their European counterparts who evidenced greater comfort in speaking of “challenges” that had their origins in socio-economic conditions like poverty. The willingness of Europeans to interpret global terrorism as more a reaction by “detrimentalized” Muslims against modernity and globalization directs their debate toward the challenge of enfranchising Muslims in Europe and the Arab world and away from talk, common in the US, of a “clash of civilizations.”

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535 Quotes are taken from Fukuyama, *America At The Crossroads*, 72, 73. Fukuyama quotes from two French historians, Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds; Islam and the West* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2004); Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Ladan and Boya Boroumand, “Terror, Islam, and Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2002): 5-20. All of these authors share the belief that jihadism is not representative of Islam but rather a syncretism of Western beliefs and is therefore a sign of Muslim disenfranchisement with the modern world. Fukuyama claims that this explains the motivations of the 9/11 hijackers. He alludes to Mohammed Atta’s education in Europe as a prime example. The motivations for the remaining 18 hijackers, who were largely born and raised in Saudi Arabia, receive no mention.
The fact that the United States can effectively project military power abroad makes it more likely that it will view such action positively, according to Kagan. Conversely, Europeans lack the ability to project military strength abroad and therefore are generally suspicious of the effectiveness of military action. Much like a man in the forest armed with only a knife may view the presence of a bear as tolerable given his options, Kagan analogizes, Europeans today are more comfortable allowing threats to linger; Americans, on the other hand, are like a man in the forest armed with a gun and therefore more apt to shoot the bear than run the risk of being mauled later. Sounding very much the realist, Kagan initially explains the differences between Europeans and Americans as the result of the relative balance of power.

When the United States was weak, it practiced the strategies of indirection, the strategies of weakness; now that the United States is powerful, it behaves as powerful nations do. When the European great powers were strong, they believed in strength and martial glory.

But the differences were not simply the result of power politics. The United States behaves differently than the great European powers once did. “The United States is a behemoth with a conscience,” Kagan writes. “Americans have never accepted the principles of Europe’s old order, never embraced a Machiavellian perspective.” Nonetheless, the United States lives in what Kagan calls a Hobbesian world, a world where force still matters, where “power is the ultimate determinant of national security and success.”

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536Ibid., 13.
537Ibid., 6.
538Ibid., 11.
539Ibid., 13.
contrast, adhere to a belief in a “‘postmodern system’ that does not rest on a balance of power but a ‘rejection of force’ and on ‘self-enforced rules of behavior.’” Europe has, in the words of former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer, moved away from “the old system of balance with its continued national orientation…and the permanent danger of nationalist ideologies and confrontations.” In this political environment, it is only natural that “raison d’etat and the amorality of Machiavelli’s theories of statescraft…have been replaced by a moral consciousness” in international affairs.

Kagan does not reproach the Europeans for their development of a so-called postmodern system of governance. Given the destructiveness of the power politics in the first half of the twentieth century, the success of the European Union is remarkable and worthy of considerable praise. “Europeans have stepped out of the Hobbesian world of anarchy and into the Kantian world of perpetual peace,” and for this they should be applauded. What has occurred on the European continent since 1945 represents “a geopolitical fantasy” in that “the German lion has laid down with the French lamb.” This world-historical act has taken on the quality of a “sacred mystique” for Europeans, about which they are understandably quite proud, and it has instilled in European officials a confidence that a stable, liberal world order may be maintained with minimal use of force. It is this insight that Europeans offer to the world: “not power, but transcendence of

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540 Ibid., 16. Kagan is quoting from Robert Cooper, a British diplomat, in article that appeared in the Observer on April 7, 2002.

541 Ibid. Quote is from a speech by Fischer in May 2000 at Humboldt University in Berlin.

542 Ibid. Quote is by Robert Cooper.

543 Ibid.
power.” It is this principle of transcending power that European officials, like former EU President Romano Prodi, believe represents an exportable model of governance for the world. By “making a success of integration we are demonstrating to the world that it is possible to create a method of peace.” Yet in championing their born again idealism, European officials often fail to acknowledge that its origin and success lies precisely in the destruction of Germany, an act of war consistent with the realities of a hobbesian world.

So, have things really changed to the point that power is now obsolete? Not so from the American perspective. And it is here, Kagan concludes, that “American power, and its willingness to exercise that power - unilaterally if necessary - represents a threat to Europe’s new sense of mission. Perhaps the greatest threat.” European officials were in fact more worried, according to Kagan, about America’s extra-legal action against Iraq in the buildup to the war than they were about the threat posed by a potentially nuclear armed Iraq. Unilateral action represents, at its core, an “assault on the essence of ‘postmodern’ Europe.” Europeans understand arguments regarding American unilateralism and US exceptionalism as “an assault on Europe’s new ideas, a denial of their universal validity, much as the monarchies of eighteen- and nineteenth-century Europe were an assault on American republican ideals.” The challenge for Europe, of course, is to make itself strategically relevant in a world that clings tenaciously to the logic of power politics when Europe sees its mission as one of “oppos(ing) power.” Given the preponderance of American power in the world today, Europe sees its mission as one of opposing the United States in an effort to

544Ibid., 17.
545Ibid., 18.
546Ibid., 21.
“multilateralize” its behavior. Tensions surface when the United States persists in behavior that Europeans can not agree to; or, put crudely, when the Europeans reject their chore of “doing the dishes” while the United States “makes the dinner” of international politics.

Philosophically, however, the tension runs much deeper, according to Kagan. Modern Europe was born on the basis of a single principal: the taming of Germany or, more precisely, what Fischer called the “risks and temptations objectively inherent in Germany’s dimensions and central situation.” To do this, two strategic decisions were necessary. Again, quoting Fischer: “the USA’s decision to stay in Europe” and “France’s and Germany’s commitment to the principle of integration, beginning with economic links.”

But, for Kagan, the latter could never have occurred without the former. Which is to say, that Europe’s post-modern system of power-free politics was given birth by the exercise of the most brutal and visible form of power: crushing defeat in war and the permanent presence of the victor. More eloquently, Kagan writes:

The United States, in short, solved the Kantian paradox for the Europeans. Kant had argued that the only solution to the immoral horrors of the Hobbesian world was the creation of a world government. But he also feared that the “state of universal peace” made possible by world government would be an even greater threat to human freedom than the Hobbesian international order, inasmuch as such a government, with its monopoly of power, would become “the most horrible despotism.”

What Kagan calls the “great paradox” - the fact that “American power made it possible for Europeans to believe that power was no longer important” - is not well understood by

547 Ibid., 23.

548 Ibid. Internal quotes are taken from Pangle & Ahrensdorf, Justice Among Nations, 200-201.
Europeans. But some acknowledgement is necessary and not only for reasons of intellectual honesty. If the international arena is still one where power politics is necessary, with the United States providing the power (“making the meal”) and the Europeans providing the legitimacy (“doing the dishes”), ex-ante or ex-post, then a stable world order requires greater appreciation among European nations for this inconsistency. Returning to the British diplomat, Richard Cooper, the “challenge of the postmodern world is to get used to the idea of double standards.” It is perfectly fine for Europeans to “operate on the basis of laws and open cooperative security” but when dealing with the outside world, “we need to revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era - force, preemptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary.” To balance such inconsistencies requires a fervent belief in the rightness of one’s beliefs, one’s value system. This tends to be easier for many Americans because while Americans are idealists, Kagan argued, “they have no experience promoting ideals successfully without power.”

There was more to the European objection to the war, according to Francis Fukuyama, if only Robert Kagan, Charles Krauthammer and other neoconservatives would have listened. In his post-mortem of the invasion, Fukuyama complains bitterly that neoconservatives chose to understand European criticisms as simply a “self-proclaimed normative commitment to multilateralism and international law” which, in turn, served to mask hypocritical European motives: basically, “the Europeans are Lilliputians who want to tie the American Gulliver down and reduce American freedom of action.” But neoconservatives were wrong about this and their failure to listen compounded the mistakes of the Bush Administration.

If (Krauthammer) had listened carefully to what many Europeans were actually saying, he would have discovered that much of their objection to the war was not a normative one having to do with procedural issues and the UN, but rather a prudential one having to do with the overall wisdom of attacking Iraq.\footnote{550Fukuyama, “The Neoconservative Moment,” 61-62.}

Simply put, the Europeans did not believe the threat posed by Iraq to be as imminent as did proponents of the war. On the matter of Iraq’s threat to the United States and the West, the Europeans believed that should Iraq procure nuclear weapons, the threat could nonetheless be contained. Moreover, they did not believe that the purported Iraqi links with terrorists groups were as deep as the Bush Administration claimed, and they found the idea of Iraq sharing nuclear weapons with Al Qaeda to be farfetched as the two groups were ideological foes.\footnote{551This was also the opinion of the CIA which was confident that Al Qaeda and Iraq would not find common cause before the invasion. Following the invasion, of course, the two sides did find common cause in leading the insurgency. See Feith, \textit{War And Decision}, 260.} The Europeans also did not hold much faith in US nation-building skills, certainly not the nation-building skills of the Bush Administration. On each one of these points, Fukuyama concludes, “the European bottom line proved closer to the truth than the administration’s far more alarmist position.”\footnote{552Ibid.}

Fukuyama admits that each proposition for and against the war was itself debatable and that the working assumption for both sides was that Iraq possessed stockpiles of WMD. But given the distance between the reality of the occupation and the Bush administration’s case, it is important to acknowledge that “the prudential case for war was not as open-and-shut as Krauthammer and other neoconservatives believe.”

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\footnote{550Fukuyama, “The Neoconservative Moment,” 61-62.}

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\footnote{552Ibid.}
The emphasis on prudence invites a discussion, for Fukuyama, on the legitimacy of American power and its exercise. The world grants the United States legitimacy to the extent that it has faith in its judgment or the prudential character of its decision-making. Fukuyama accepts the premise that the United States is not “just any run-of-the-mill hyperpower” because “it is a democracy espousing universal values and therefore not subject to the same calculations of self-interest as other would-be hegemons.” Nonetheless, the United States must work hard to accommodate other nations if it expects to gain the moral sanction it seeks. American freedom of action is not tied down by the Lilliputians in Europe or elsewhere; rather, it is given its reach as a consequence of the legitimacy conferred on it by other nations. “Legitimacy is a tricky concept,” Fukuyama writes: “It is related to substantive principles of justice but it is not the same thing as justice. That is, people believe that a set of institutions is legitimate because they believe they are just, but legitimacy is always relative to the people conferring legitimacy.”

The legitimacy conferred by other nations is important not because “we want to feel good about ourselves, but because it is useful.” It is useful because of the freedom of action it provides the United States as it enhances the moral suasion of its efforts and de-legitimizes its enemies. The problem of legitimacy in Iraq, therefore, went far beyond the “self-proclaimed normative commitment to multilateralism and international law” by Europeans or the belief, frequently ridiculed by neoconservatives, that legitimacy is conferred by the United Nations alone. “Even if (the US) had switched the venue to NATO,” Fukuyama

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553Ibid., 62-63. He acknowledges that is easy to see why the rest of world may be suspicious of such a claim.

554Ibid., 63.

555The relative degrees of success in Afghanistan and Iraq speak to the potential effect of international legitimacy and the sanction that illegitimacy provides insurgents, rogue states and terrorists. Krauthammer emphatically disagrees with this premise to which we direct our attention in a moment.
writes, “an alliance of democracies committed to the same underlying set of values - (it) could not have mustered a majority in support of (its position), not to speak of the consensus required for collective action in that organization.” Thus, a majority of the world, and close allies of the United States, did not trust the judgment of the Bush administration to “use (its) huge margin of power wisely in the interests of the world as a whole.”

Fukuyama concedes that had things gone as smoothly as President Bush and the neoconservatives claimed in the lead-up to the war, legitimacy may have been awarded *ex post* and the United States applauded for its leadership. Alas, this was not the case. The decision by European allies and the international community not to confer legitimacy on the American invasion of Iraq was vindicated by the bumbling post-war efforts of the Bush Administration.

The Bush Administration justified the invasion of Iraq on the basis of the latter’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, its links to terrorism and the unpredictability of Saddam Hussein. Aligning himself with the realist argument, Fukuyama dismisses the plausibility of the neoconservative case that Saddam Hussein was an unpredictable risk-taker and thus could not be trusted with a nuclear weapon for fear that he might surreptitiously provide the technology to terrorists. He finds this to be a remote possibility at best. As such, “the real debate ought to have been about the merits of waging preventive war to prevent a rogue but ultimately deterrable state from getting nuclear weapons.” While this concern is a serious one, “the stakes would have been lower and the threshold for intervention consequently higher,” according to Fukuyama.557 By refocusing the debate in this fashion, Fukuyama, like

556Ibid., 64.
the European nations before him, is able to acquit himself of the more existential threat posed by Iraq and thus argue that the invasion was a wholly imprudent response to a localized problem.

The neoconservative response to Fukuyama consisted in pointing out that prudence cuts both ways: there were prudential considerations to non-action as well. The window of opportunity following September 11th for regime change in Iraq may have shut on the United States and, along with it, a return to the status quo or worse. US troops would have remained in Saudi Arabia, a primary cause of 9/11 according to frequent statements by Osama Bin Laden; the sanctions regime, to the extent it remained in force, would have continued to inflict enormous pain and suffering on the Iraqi people; to the extent the sanctions regime was weakened (together with the subsequent soaring price of oil) Saddam Hussein may have easily reconstructed his military capabilities and resumed his expansionist policies; lastly, Saddam Hussein may have reconstituted his nuclear weapons program and acquired an effective veto over US freedom of action in the region or worse. According to Krauthammer, Iraq “was increasingly Islamicizing its Ba’athi ideology…and extending its connections with terror groups” and therefore it may well have provided these weapons to terrorists like Al Qaeda.

Moving on, Krauthammer acknowledges that “no one denies the utility of international support.” It is simply common sense to “seek whatever approval, assistance, cover you can get.”

The only serious question is how far do you go? Is ‘legitimacy’ a limiting factor? When you fail to get it, do you abandon the policy? Should we have abandoned our

558Krauthammer makes this very point. Ibid., 21.
policy of regime change in Iraq - military force being the only way to achieve it -
because we lacked sufficient cover?\textsuperscript{559}

Krauthammer’s equating of legitimacy with cover illustrates his unwillingness to grant it the importance Fukuyama believes it deserves. The use of quotation marks, moreover, gives the perception that for Krauthammer legitimacy is almost a dirty, cowardly word. It is as if he chooses to approach the debate from the standpoint that no matter what the other party says or does, his decision is firm. In such a scenario, reasoned argument disintegrates into dogma. This tendency on the part of neoconservatives to strictly adhere to the better argument has made neoconservatism seem strident and lacking, at times, in prudence.

There is a revealing passage in Doug Feith’s new book, \textit{War And Decision}, regarding State Department objections to the timing of the invasion of Iraq that further illustrates this tendency. Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State at the time, agreed with Feith that Saddam Hussein’s regime posed a serious danger to the United States and that the United States was right to “attack” Iraq in an effort to remove him from power. For Armitage, the question was simply one of timing. Armitage suggested it would be preferable to attack Iraq at a later date, perhaps in 2005 following the general election or after consolidating gains in Afghanistan or following increased efforts to broaden the collation.\textsuperscript{560} Feith, however, cannot understand how Armitage can logically acknowledge the threat posed by Iraq and yet choose to wait. “It was a strange position: Armitage seems to have concluded that war was necessary to protect our country, but he favored rolling the dice on whether to take the

\textsuperscript{559}Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism,” 21.

\textsuperscript{560}Doug Feith quotes from Armitage’s comment to the author, Michael Gordon in their book \textit{Cobra II}. See Feith, \textit{Decision And War}, 246.
necessary action. I wondered whether he was *devious or confused.* 561 Why does the notion of timing strike Feith as “devious or confused?” Is it not possible that something important, even critical, may be rightfully delayed because the moment is not propitious? Feith’s conclusion is revealing because while the case for war may have been more compelling than the case for not invading, this should not prevent a conversation regarding the timing of any action. Nor should it preclude a discussion regarding the prudence of acting. There were many unknowns, including the risks of a lethal insurgency in Iraq involving elements of the former regime and Al Qaeda, something Feith admits “was not anticipated with any precision, by either intelligence analysts or policy officials.” 562 Precisely because no single argument can consider all contingencies or consequences is argument in need of prudential judgment.

The tendency among neoconservatives to cling tenaciously to what they consider the better argument to the exclusion of all else warrants criticism. Recently, neoconservatives like Robert Kagan have reflected on the failure to consider the prudential case against the invasion:

If one chose to believe this simpler version, 563 then the decision to invade Iraq might have been correct or mistaken, but the lessons to be learned from the war would concern matters of judgment, tactics and execution - don’t go to war based on faulty intelligence; don’t topple a foreign government without a plan to bring order and peace to the country afterwards; don’t be so quick on the trigger; exhaust all possibilities before going to war; be more prudent. 564

561Ibid., 247. Italics added.

562Ibid., 275.

563The simpler version of the war in Iraq is that the combination of power and idealism displayed by the Bush Administration has a long history in American politics and is not the result of national policy being seized by a group of ideologues (neoconservatives).

In the Fall of 2004, Krauthammer was in no mood to admit that the decision to invade Iraq may have been imprudent and his response to Fukuyama is further evidence of a kind of stridency. His stridency is evident in the manner in which he responds to Fukuyama’s charge that the US was its “usual inept and disorganized (self) in planning and carrying out the reconstruction” of Iraq. Krauthammer points to the success the United States had in the re-building of Germany, Japan and South Korea. These are notable successes and worthy of consideration. But the United States did not have a legitimacy problem in its occupation of Germany, Japan or South Korea as these occupations proceeded from wars that were initiated by others and won by the United States. This sequence is crucial. It provides a well of legitimacy that extends to both the occupied nation and the international community. The failure to recall this salient point while defending a doctrine of preemption leaves one with the feeling that despite Krauthammer’s objections to the contrary, he and other neoconservatives did underestimate the task at hand.

Krauthammer goes on to claim that the Sunni insurgency and the rebellion by Moqtada al-Sadr have nothing to do with an absence of legitimacy: these groups “are not impressed by UN resolutions,” he writes. While it is highly probable that Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia cares not an iota about the “opinions of mankind,” why is Krauthammer so confident that Iran has not been emboldened in its

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565Norman Podhoretz, is a prime example of the stridency of some neoconservatives in the face of some of the disastrous consequences in Iraq. Arguably, with the departure of Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense in the Fall of 2006 and the implementation of the surge, there was an acknowledgment of the failure of the Iraq policy that defined the previous four years.

566Krauthammer, “In Defense of Democratic Realism,” 23. It is important to note that many neoconservatives were skeptical about the proposed troop levels for the invasion of Iraq but ultimately deferred to the Secretary of Defense, in part because of the success of the war in Afghanistan and, in part, because the benefits of changing regimes in Iraq was better than the status quo.
support of the Sadr Brigades in light of the international opposition to the war? One gets
the impression that this possibility does not factor into his thinking at all.

The failure to seriously consider the timing of the invasion in the face of
overwhelming international opposition is a real problem for neoconservatism. And while, as
Kagan observes, “prudence is not a foreign policy,” it is the single moderating factor in the
success or failure of any foreign policy. Doctrine only goes so far. A foreign policy that
precludes prudential considerations other than ones that support the policy are bound to
reach tolerable limits. What these limits are is difficult to discern with the precision desired
by Krauthammer. When, exactly, does one abandon a policy or doctrine even when one
feels that one’s argument is the stronger? When does the president of the United States
derel to “the opinions of mankind” and when does he lead? How does a policy maker
decide on how many resources to dedicate to small, but existential threats? Is Vice-President
Cheney correct in his assessment that even if there is only a one percent chance of nuclear
terrorism it is the duty of the US government to treat it as a certainty? Is such a policy
sustainable even if correct? Is it wise or prudent? In a post-9/11 world, every American
president will have to answer the question of how much risk the United States should
tolerate in a world where the nexus between terrorists and nuclear weapons is more than a
mere hypothetical.

Political science has wrestled with the question of prudence since its foundation as a
discipline in the writings of Aristotle. Importantly, for our study, Aristotelian political
science closely linked prudence to common sense. Common sense was the necessary, if
insufficient, cause for prudential thinking. According to Aristotle, however, prudence was
forever vulnerable to theories or doctrines which questioned its relevance. In Chapter 3, we
addressed the challenges that modern political and social science presented to common sense and, consequently, to moral, political and prudential judgment. The very appeal of neoconservatism, I have argued, rests with its appreciation for common sense as the epistemologically relevant starting point to all moral and political conversations and its willingness to defend it.

Common sense is the means through which human beings grapple with the world around them and derive principles which govern human action. The ability to take the world as it is, and the understanding that the phenomenal world comes to us as a given, supports all intellectual endeavors including natural science. I have argued throughout this thesis that acknowledging this reality provides for greater dexterity of thought as it avoids the trap of doctrinaire thinking whereby the world is squeezed into pre-existing theoretical concepts. Modern social and political science, however, whether of a positivistic or neopositivistic variety, understands the world in precisely this manner: theoretical science forms the basis for practical science which is to say that practical science or common sense is incomprehensible without theory to make sense of it. In this context, common sense loses its rightful place as the starting point for human inquiry and, as a result, prudential thinking is undermined.567 This is necessarily so because, in the words of Leo Strauss, the rejection of common sense by modern social science represents, in turn, a rejection of that “understanding by which political life, political understanding, political experience, stands or falls.”568 The consequences of this rejection threaten the moral and political fabric of a

567 According to Strauss, common sense does not rely on theory for its justification; common sense is fully self-sufficient in this regard. It is able to derive the “givens” of the phenomenal world on the basis of experience alone. Modern science has fundamentally altered this process of thought. See Chapter 3 for a lengthier review.

568 Ibid., 212.
liberal society and therefore a defense of prudence and its foundation in common sense must be mounted.

I have argued that neoconservatism’s embrace of common sense represents just such a defense. Its defense of the epistemological importance of common sense stands as a categorical rejection of the foundation for modern social and political science. The origins of this defense came by way of the neoconservative reaction to the policies of our selected theorists, Morgenthau, Kissinger, Waltz and Mearsheimer. For neoconservatives, their policy recommendations regarding arms control, MAD theory, détente, nuclear proliferations as well as a general opposition to war and the belief that the internal characteristics of a state does not matter were, and are, brazenly unrealistic, not to mention logically flawed and politically naïve. And yet, in making the case for war in Iraq, it is neoconservatism that is open to the charge of squeezing common sense to the breaking point by failing to consider what might go wrong. In important ways, neoconservative thinking hardened without properly considering the consequences. The casualness with which they answered Bernard Lewis’ earlier question, “why would we feel threatened by such a change?,” provides a poignant example of how an existing conclusion was provided to a question that should have been freshly considered, as if posed for the very first time. As the war in Iraq has shown, change may indeed be worse than the status quo.569

569Prudence, of course, is also closely associated with courage, for it is one thing to perceive the risks of how actions taken today may play out in the future but it is a wholly different thing to voice these concerns in a timely and constructive manner. Waltz and other realists displayed their courage in their opposition to the war in Iraq (though given their general objection to war, this may be less an example of courage and more an instinctual reaction). Many of today’s critics of the war were not so courageous and their denunciations, so common today, of neoconservatism and the Bush Administration tend to ring hollow. While Fukuyama may argue that the challenges in Iraq were “predictable in advance,” his predictions were nowhere to be found prior to the invasion when it mattered most. As he told the New York Times, “I figured it was going to happen anyway, and there wasn't anything I could do about it. I believed it was a big roll of the dice, and I didn't believe it was a wise bet. But on the other hand, it was a roll of the dice, and for all I knew, it might have worked.” See David D. Kirkpatrick, "War Heats Up in the Neoconservative Fold," New York Times, August 22, 2004. The same too can be said for some of the more vocal conservative critics of the war, including George Will, who was an
Conclusion:

Where does this leave us? In the end, no matter how subtle one’s political philosophy, or systematic one’s theory, the decision to pursue one policy over another is a function of judgment. This thesis has been an effort to explain those epistemological, philosophical, moral, political and strategic beliefs that inform the judgments of neoconservatives and distinguish neoconservatism from realism and the other major traditions. The connective tissue for neoconservatism is a belief in common sense and the moral perspective of the average person. The effort here has been to highlight the implications of these beliefs for political judgment and public policy. The implications are especially important for students of international relations theory who are looking to fully engage the major foreign policy issues of the day. Neoconservatism as a name for a set of political ideas may well be in disrepute in many quarters as a consequence of the war in Iraq, but the beliefs which support it will remain because they point us in a direction away from the moral relativism and counterintuitive logic of contemporary international relations theory.570

While the thought of basing a political philosophy on common sense and the moral perspective of the average person may strike many theorists as quaint, outmoded or downright irrelevant, there are signs that some realists are beginning to grapple with the outsized influence that neoconservatives have enjoyed over US foreign policy, an influence

enthusiastic supporter of the Bush Administration’s efforts to bring democracy to Iraq and criticized those who “too pessimistically” believed that Iraq was ill suited “to experience democratization.” Following the disastrous war effort, he changed course and dismissed the case for war as based on “preposterous assumptions” about what was possible and conservatives within the administration should have known better. See Kagan, “Neocon Nation.”

570The success of the recent military surge may offer some respite for neoconservatives and allow them to rebuild their image as their image and therefore to some extent their political philosophy.
which, not incidentally, has often come at the expense of realism. Michael C. Williams, for instance, has sought to explain how neoconservatism tends to respond more fully to the aspirations of the American people “by linking issues of foreign policy to questions of domestic political virtue.”\textsuperscript{571} This tendency is an advantage for neoconservatives because, for too long, realism has become associated with a narrow materialism and a rejection of morality in politics, according to Williams. While not quite ready to concede a place for political virtue and morality as commonly understood, Williams does concede a rhetorical victory for neoconservatism if only for the reason that people like to hear their values reflected in the pronouncements of their elected leaders. In order to counter the perception that realism is morally agnostic, realism must take a page from the neoconservative playbook. For Williams, this means that realism must embrace its own unique morality, that is, the moral relativism or the “relativistic philosophy” of Hans Morgenthau.\textsuperscript{572} But if realism expects to seriously engage with neoconservatism, this ploy will not suffice. Neoconservatism represents something much greater than a change in rhetoric as it understands morality as something universal, a good that transcends national borders and different political regimes. In this context, neoconservatism represents a profound challenge to the set of assumptions that theorists like Williams, Morgenthau, Kissinger, Jervis, Waltz and Mearsheimer make about the relevance of morality in politics and human nature, not to mention the structure of the international system. And along the way, it has contributed a


\textsuperscript{572}Morgenthau, “National Interest and Moral Principles in Foreign Policy,” 211. As seen in Chapter 3, for Morgenthau, relativism represents the means for human freedom and expression and is cause for optimism. See also Michael Williams’ “Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics,” \textit{International Organization} 58 (2004): 644, where he defends Morgenthau’s moral relativism and “the essential emptiness of politics” that it entails. For Williams, it is unfair to characterize realism as amoral because it offers the world the true morality of moral relativism.

258
great deal to elevating the importance of common sense to political inquiry and has made talk of prudence relevant again to international relations theory.

The war in Iraq has challenged much of this. The reputational risks of a costlier and bloodier war have made neoconservatism seem detached from reality and, for many, utterly lacking in common sense. But the recent success of the US military’s surge rehabilitates the neoconservative argument that the occupation’s earlier difficulties were the result of a failure of leadership and an insufficient level of US troops, not a failure of ideas. I have argued in this chapter that the arguments put forth by neoconservatives in support of invading Iraq were compelling and well reasoned and, yet, they may have been rash in brushing aside the prudential case against the war. This presents us with a classic paradox: a political philosophy that makes a claim to being more open to prudence itself may have acted imprudently. However, if the surge is successful in bringing peace and political stability to Iraq, and recent events suggest that its success has been dramatic, then the charge by neoconservatives that it was not the policy of invading Iraq, but rather its execution, that led to disastrous results will gain in credibility. Nonetheless, neoconservatives can be faulted for failing to highlight the potential pitfalls of a preemptive

573 Some realist critics have made scathing accusations of the motivations and competence of neoconservatives. See Stephen M. Walt, “The Shattered Kristol Ball,” National Interest, October 3, 2008, where he alleges that Bill Kristol was guilty of making highly “dubious claims” that the occupation of Iraq would be smooth and relatively painless. He quotes Kristol’s comments just prior to the invasion that “very few wars in American history were better prepared or more thoroughly than this one by the President” as evidence of Kristol’s poor judgment regarding US preparedness for an occupation of Iraq. In fairness to Kristol, this comment was made regarding a series of speeches by President Bush “about the need to change the regime in Iraq, the rationale for changing regimes in Iraq.” Kristol was not commenting on troop levels or the ease of a prospective occupation as Walt implies. For context, see NBC’s Meet the Press, March 1, 2003, located at http://global.factiva.com.proxy.library.nd.edu/ha/default.aspx.

574 See David Rose, “Neo-Culpa.” To their credit, as early as April 2004, neoconservatives had called for additional troops at a level on par with the surge. See William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Too Few Troops,” The Weekly Standard, April 26, 2004 where the authors argued that “close observers of the conflict in Iraq, civilian and military alike (military, of course, speaking off the record), say that at least two additional divisions—at least 30,000 extra troops—are needed in Iraq just to deal with the current crisis.”

invasion of Iraq in the debate preceding the war. Neoconservatives may be partially excused for this failure because its engagement with realism typically centers around the latter’s emphasis on the irrelevance of morality in world affairs, a truncated conception of human nature and the automaticity with which the world balances aggression. This has created a frightful situation in which the two traditions tend to speak past one another and fail to engage over the most important issues of the day. It has also had the effect of reducing the debate regarding matters of war and peace to a partisan stalemate. This stalemate impoverishes American political discourse. This thesis represents an effort to explain the origins of this predicament and the importance for students of international relations to come to grips with the philosophical, epistemological, moral, political and strategic basis to a legitimate and competing theory of international relations, the third way of neoconservatism.


