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Peter Steinfels

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM IS RESPONSIBILITY

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Good news

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for private enterprise

The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics by Peter Steinfels. Simon and Schuster. 335 pp.

by Frank Goble

The liberal monopoly in higher education is under attack by a small but influential group that is being called neoconservative. Who, exactly, are they? They are, to begin with, intellectuals. *Newsweek* says: "In intellectual circles, the social thinkers who were once the driving force of Democratic liberalism—men like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and John Kenneth Galbraith—have been upstaged by a group of 'neoconservative' academics, many of them refugees from the liberal left, including Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, James Q. Wilson, Edward Banfield, Seymour Martin Lipset and Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan of New York."

This book review by Frank Goble is reprinted with permission from Across the Board, October 1979. The magazine is published by The Conference Board, one of America's most influential business associations.

Peter Steinfels, a credentialed member of the liberal academic majority, examines the neoconservatives with mixed emotions. "For decades," he states, "American liberals have bemoaned the absence of a serious American conservatism. If only we had some worthy adversary, they complained, and not this ragtag of right-wing hysterics, superannuated Roosevelt-haters, Southern nostalgics, residual racists, pseudogentry, professional witch-hunters, and chest-thumping weaponmongers. Why can't there be a conservative movement of erudite Harvard professors and quick-witted public men? . . . As it happens, such a conservative movement has arrived. Not just emerged but *arrived*, taking center stage in American politics with a speed and a thoroughness that have left liberals stunned and disarmed.

"Like no other group in America today, these new conservative intellectuals are setting the agenda for our national political life, laying down the ground rules for public discussion. They dine with the President, advise his advisers, sit in the Senate, plot strategy for the political parties, tutor the media, philosophize for big business, and rally the forgotten cold warriors of the labor movement. The new

conservatives are solidly entrenched in the elite universities—the established church of our day—and they are rapidly constructing an independent intellectual base of imposing size: foundations, journals, and research institutes from which to launch their missionary activities."

Steinfels received a Ph.D. in European history from Columbia. He is now executive editor of *Commonweal* and has written many articles and reviews for *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Dissent*, *The New York Times Book Review* and other highly rated liberal publications.

His book tells all—probably more than most executives want to know about the neoconservatives. Admitting at the start that he is not one of them, Steinfels has sought to maintain scholarly objectivity and seems to have done so.

The neoconservatives, he says, are a result of the turbulent Sixties. Most of them are "refugees from the liberal left," as *Newsweek* said, and some of them were even fervent Marxists in their youth.

Their ranks include Harvard professors Nathan Glazer, Daniel Bell, James Q. Wilson, Seymour Martin

Lipset; Manhattan writers and editors Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, Diana Trilling, Hilton Kramer; political scientists such as Samuel P. Huntington, Aaron Wildavsky, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jeane Kirkpatrick; foreign policy specialists Michael Ledeen, Richard Pipes, Robert Tucker, Edward Luttwak; political operatives Ben J. Wattenberg, Penn Kemble, Bayard Rustin and Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Whatever their specialty, they write, and their favorite magazines are *Commentary* and *The Public Interest*. They have also found a willing market for their essays in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Encounter*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, and other prestigious publications. These people *know* that ideas count and, Steinfels admits, "they have been remarkably successful."

¹ Neoconservatives differ from their liberal colleagues in their attitudes toward business and socialism. They are, in other words, openly pro-private enterprise and the discipline of the marketplace. Irving Kristol, one of their most influential writers, says that America's problems should not be charged against private enterprise. As an engine of material goods, capitalism cannot be faulted. If decisive proof is needed, one can simply observe the failure of the socialist economies.

Although they may disagree about the details, Steinfels says that "overall, neoconservatism displays a remarkably unified thrust in its argument . . . consistently benign in their interpretation of the performance of established institutions, . . . suspicious of all but the most gentle democratic and egalitarian impulses."

The American crisis is cultural—a "startling absence of values," says Kristol. The primary reason for this cultural crisis is the "adversary culture" or "new class." Who is in the new class? Professors, journalists, intellectuals—the "knowledge industry," the "university-government-media" complex.

The neoconservatives parted company with their liberal associates during the turbulent Sixties. They were opposed to campus radicalism and liberal professors who did nothing to discourage the radicals. This dislike for campus counterculture soon widened to include other antitraditional phenomena such as women's liberation, muckraking journalism, *The New York Review of Books*, Ralph Nader, the ecology movement, the American Civil Liberties Union, and John Gardner's *Common Cause*.

What do the neoconservatives believe? Like most Americans, writes Steinfels, they "disapprove of the unequal treatment suffered by many racial minorities, women and the poor, but they have given far more attention to criticizing strategies for remedying these inequalities than they have to the inequalities themselves. . . . They have been vocal critics of affirmative action and busing, and cool to community control, many poverty programs, campaign finance reform, and schemes to redistribute income through changes in the tax laws.

"New educational programs at the primary level as well as open admissions at the college level have been greeted skeptically by neoconservatism; so have most proposals to extend medical services, to guarantee employment, and to protect environment. Neoconservatism has little use for liberal concerns about the rights of prisoners, thinks the beneficial effects of punishment deserve more consideration, and puts in a good word for censorship . . .

"On matters international, neoconservatives are divided over the matter of Vietnam, though the opponents kept their distance from militant antiwar efforts. The war was a tragic 'error,' not a national 'crime.' Neoconservatives have been strong supporters of Israel, dubious about Arab intentions and most initiatives for a negotiated settlement, including Washington's. But the United States—and its military power—remain, in their eyes, a global force for good; they suspect détente and the

evolution of Communist parties in Western Europe; they assertively defend Cold War anti-Communism, the CIA and images like the 'free world'; they are unsympathetic to the economic claims of the Third World nations."

Neoconservatives believe that the market is an efficient instrument for allocating resources while preserving personal freedom. They are respectful of traditional values and institutions: religion, the family, Western culture, equality of opportunity and personal responsibility.

The current crisis is primarily a "cultural" crisis—a problem of values, morals, and manners—a crisis of authority.

Irving Kristol's advice to business executives has already received considerable publicity. "One preliminary step," he wrote, "would be to decide *not* to give money to support those activities of the New Class which are inimical to corporate survival. A more positive step, of course, would be for corporations to support those elements of the New Class—and they exist, if not in large numbers—which do believe in the preservation of a strong private sector."

The neoconservative outlook, according to Steinfels, has produced "telling critiques of contending political views and provocative analyses of specific political proposals; it has devoted its attention to fundamental questions its rivals have frequently overlooked; and it deserves, accordingly, a thoughtful, extensive, and careful consideration."

"As often as I find myself infuriated by a particular argument," he writes, "or distressed by the cumulative effect of its admonitions, I am challenged and provoked by its arguments and seldom find that I can pass through a major neoconservative essay without having learned something that transcends this month's news." He believes that one of the movement's greatest strengths is the willingness to take up general questions of culture and morality, when both academic philosophy and religion have abdicated this task.

"Kristol is right," says Steinfels, "to insist that we suffer from a *spiritual* chaos. Liberalism and radicalism," Steinfels continues, "have generally abandoned the effort to explore the questions that have traditionally, and in my opinion most profoundly, been posed in religious language and symbol. While 90 percent of the American population retain some explicit commitment to religious beliefs or institutions, most of our cultural analysis and public philosophizing is done by the other 10 percent."

The problem with the neoconservative outlook, according to Steinfels, is its preoccupation with some aspects of American life while being blind to others or complacent.

This point of view, should it prevail, threatens to diminish the promise of American democracy. Another major fault is the neoconservative tendency to treat adversaries as "feeble-minded or dubiously motivated."

Neoconservatives, especially Moynihan and Kristol, according to Steinfels, are sometimes careless with facts, present half-truths, and often exaggerate. Irving Kristol, for example, makes frequent use of such words as "always," "all," "ever," "whole," "only."

For those of us who prefer private enterprise to the cancer-like welfare state, the growth of neoconservatism is good news. Ideas have tremendous power. Intel-

lectuals, because they are professional ideamongers, have tremendous influence.

Steinfels is correct in accusing some of the leading neoconservatives of not being entirely objective or accurate. But his liberal colleagues are equally guilty. People writing in the areas of politics and public policy all have this difficulty.

Irving Kristol and his colleagues have been trying to give business executives some very good advice—stop funding activities antagonistic toward private enterprise and greatly increase support for institutions and individuals in favor of private enterprise and limited government.

Kristol has also tried, without much success, to convince leaders in

A few prominent neoconservatives



Brzezinski



Moynihan



Kristol



Rustin

the business community that economic ignorance is not the primary reason for growing antagonism toward business. After all, as he correctly points out, most people were ignorant about economics 30 years ago, but they were not antagonistic toward business.

Peter Steinfels' conviction that neoconservatives have achieved powerful influence in Washington is overdrawn. They may be having some slight influence in economic policy, but Washington's huge bureaucracies are certainly not moving to the philosophical right and foreign policy is completely dominated by "liberal" thinkers. The United States continues to move away from limited government and private enterprise because that is what the majority of social and behavioral science professors and their graduates throughout government and the media continue to advocate.

The neoconservative viewpoint, however, is growing and gaining influence, especially on campus and in the media. It is a good beginning that urgently needs encouragement.

One of the strengths of this movement is the recognition that the current crisis is primarily cultural—a crisis of values and ethics, a crisis of authority. This implies a need to reestablish the viability of America's traditional values. It is encouraging that Steinfels at least agrees that the problem is cultural and ethical.

A neoconservative weakness is the lack of specific solutions. If too much government is a problem, what is the specific strategy to reduce it? If busing is not the way to achieve racial justice, what is a viable alternative? If the problem is a cultural-ethical crisis, whose ethics are to be taught and how?

Overall, the neoconservative movement is an important and encouraging development. This book provides much valuable information for serious students of present chaotic social trends and the people who influence these trends. ■

CHARACTER EDUCATION CORNER

The Maryland General Assembly recently passed a Resolution instructing the Governor to appoint a 20-member

commission to "identify and assess ongoing programs in morals and value education in the schools of Maryland, if any, and to make recommendations towards the implementation of these programs into the curriculum."

The new commission asked the State Attorney General to give them a legal opinion on whether there are any legal impediments to the teaching of ethical values in public schools.

In July of this year, the Commission received a seven-page opinion from State Attorney General Stephen H. Sachs.

The Attorney General states, "We have concluded that the fact that ethical values are taught in the public school system does not, standing alone, violate the establishment and free exercise clauses of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution . . . or any privacy rights arising under the First Amendment. . . . However, it is important to point out that although, in theory, the teaching of values in the public school system is not constitutionally deficient, certain specific subject and methodologies taught or employed in the name of 'values education' could, in fact, violate the religion clauses or the privacy rights of a student."

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ROBERT CLANCY, PRESIDENT
HENRY GEORGE INSTITUTE
55 WEST 42ND STREET #462-A
NEW YORK, NY 10036

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NO. 163

(213) 798-0791

1143 North Lake Avenue • Pasadena, California 91104

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