

Conservative debates over the Iraq war and before

Henry Farrell,
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science/Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University
Contact: henry@henryfarrell.net

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Disagreements over the the invasion of Iraq seem to be creating a major schism among conservative foreign policy specialists. On the one hand, neo-conservatives and their sympathizers continue to defend the Iraq war as a necessary and appropriate response to the new security challenges that the US faces. On the other, realists depict it as an unwarranted adventure that traduces the basic conservative principle of prudence. These disagreements have led to a mass-exodus of board-members from conservative house-journal, *The National Interest*.¹ Pleas for unity² (lest conservative factionalism allow the Democrats to take the White House in 2008) have gone unheeded, as conservative realists have sought to build coalitions with liberal internationalist Democrats through initiatives such as the Partnership for a Secure America, and neo-conservatives (less enthusiastically) to create ties with pro-invasion Democrats such as Peter Beinart. Isolationists, while very much a minority in the conservative movement, continue to maintain their separation from both.³

These disagreements aren't just a product of the policy disasters in Iraq. They reflect a long-standing dispute among conservatives, and bear a strong family resemblance to arguments over containment that began in the early part of the Cold War, and reached their apex during the Reagan era. Even so, the substance of the dispute has changed dramatically over the decades - a

¹ See David D. Kirkpatrick, "Battle Splits Conservative Magazine," *The New York Times*, March 13 2005.

² See Henry Nau, "No Enemies on the Right," pp. 18-27, *The National Interest* 78, Winter 2004/2005.

³ As isolationist conservatism effectively gets around the problem of international politics by bracketing it, and is now a more-or-less fringe opinion, I don't discuss it further in this paper.

neo-conservative strain of thought which advocated cooperation with dictators in the fight against Communism two decades ago, now argues on behalf of a global crusade to topple dictators and promote democracy, while erstwhile realists eschew the use of force, and preach the benefits of multilateral institutions.

Why have conservatives continued to wage the same internal war over a forty year period? Why have they made so little progress in resolving the fundamental issues that divide them? And why do the broad outlines of the struggle remain the same, even while the issues at stake have changed dramatically?

In this paper, I'm going to argue that there's a fundamental incoherence at the heart of this debate, an inability of conservatism to provide a serious analysis of international politics in its own terms. This isn't to say that conservatives can't say interesting, or important things about international relations, but it is to say that their interesting arguments are unlikely to be uniquely conservative arguments (while there is one semi-exception, the quite interesting conservative critique of certain kinds of statebuilding policies, it provides a poor source for choosing positive actions). Conservative thought as such provides a remarkably bad fit to the theory and (for conservatives, more worrying) the practice of international relations. International relations scholars are quite well used to realist indictments of liberal thinking for its attachment to multilateral institutions, and discounting of the role of brute force and power relations in international affairs. What is less frequently observed is that the international realm is very nearly as malign an environment for traditional conservatives as it is for liberals, and for much the same reasons. There is little space for legitimacy in international affairs, and what sources of legitimacy there are seem anathematic to most American conservatives. International politics

either involves power and interest-based bargaining, with little recourse to the kinds of traditions and reciprocal loyalties that conservatives prize, or else forms of legitimacy (the United Nations, international law) which conservatives find opprobrious.

The result has been that conservatives have found international politics a remarkably uncomfortable subject matter. Those conservatives who proposed a realist analysis of international affairs have always been vulnerable to attack from other conservatives as sell-outs who fail to recognize that international relations is as subject to the basic principles of morality as domestic politics. Yet the opposite approach, of proposing the reform of international politics so that it conforms more closely to conservative values is utopian in the bad sense of the word, and there has furthermore been a persistent tendency among some reformist conservatives to display less interest in the conservative values that they purport to be promoting than in the invigorating effects of the struggle to promote these values on the conservative movement.

There have been historical periods where these two, fundamentally antipathetic tendencies within conservatism have been aligned; most notably during periods of the Cold War. Where there is a real enemy that poses a fundamental threat to the US (or can be depicted as posing such a threat), it becomes easier to reconcile realists' concern with material security on the one hand, and idealists' crusading zeal on the other. On the one hand, realists can (with a little creative imagination) sign up to efforts to fight back against a real security threat, on the other, idealists (with a little creative blindness) can overlook the squalid alliances that geopolitics dictates. But when there is no enemy to unite conservatives of different camps, we may reasonably expect to see discord.

I begin the paper with a brief account of historical debates among conservatives over

foreign policy. My purpose here is to show how present-day debates between neo-conservatives and realists have a considerable historical pedigree, and in fact reflect a deeper and well-established disagreement between idealist movement conservatives and realist policy-makers.

I then go on to lay out the current dispute among conservatives. Next, I use this history to get at the underlying issues at stake in the argument, both now and historically. I then conclude.

Containment, Reagan and Conservative Foreign Policy

Current divisions among conservatives were foreshadowed by earlier disagreements over US policy towards the Soviet Union in the post World War II era. The “containment” strategy set out in George Kennan’s famous cable from Moscow and 1947 “X article” in *Foreign Affairs*, proposed that the US should seek to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining any further influence, through the “adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points.” However, containment did not seek to challenge Soviet hegemony over those parts of the world (Eastern Europe) where it was already dominant. Kennan’s approach became the linchpin of US strategy towards the Soviet Union under Truman and his immediate successors, embraced by both liberals and centrist Republicans. As the US and USSR reached an effective *modus vivendi*, US policy makers became notably less willing to countenance interventions that might have upset the balance.

Many conservatives viewed containment as immoral and an effective capitulation to Soviet tyranny, frequently claiming that mainstream Republican and Democratic politicians were Soviet dupes, if they weren’t indeed plants and fifth columnists. As much effort was devoted to

identifying the enemy within, as to proposing foreign policy solutions; domestic and international politics were seen as part of the same struggle. As in a later generation, much of their intellectual firepower came from former leftists such as Whittaker Chambers and James Burnham.⁴ Conservative critics of containment had little initial success in pressing for a more activist US policy towards Warsaw Pact countries, and indeed saw containment gradually dwindling from an active commitment to counter Soviet influence, into an effective tacit acceptance of Soviet power, and the emergence in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis of a more or less stable set of understandings between East and West over how they should interact. However, they did succeed over the longer term in gaining control of the Republican party, in the Goldwater Presidential campaign and its aftermath.

The Reagan presidency saw the advent to power of movement conservatives who were unhappy with the accommodations of the Cold War on moral grounds. The “Reagan Doctrine,” which critics initially characterized as a return to robust containment,⁵ in fact was considerably more far reaching than the original formulation of containment had been. It advocated the roll-back of Soviet power from Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Proxy wars in Afghanistan and Nicaragua went together with “soft” measures such as more robust use of the Helsinki process to encourage change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In an appeal to movement conservatives (and an implicit rebuke to the *Realpolitik* of Nixon and Kissinger), Reagan cast the roll-back of Soviet influence as a moral crusade against an “evil empire.” This led to a dispute

⁴ John B. Judis, “The Origins of Conservative Foreign Policy,” available at <http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF0803/Judis/Judis.html> .

⁵ Christopher Layne, “The Real Conservative Agenda,” *Foreign Policy* 61, Winter 1985-1986, pp. 73-93.

between “realists,” who accepted Kennan’s analysis, and opposed a major effort to upset the balance of power,⁶ and movement conservatives, who believed that the US was engaged in a moral struggle, which the realists lost. They were either assimilated within a new, rather more ambitious agenda to reform the fundamentals of the Cold War system (an agenda which could, at least in part, be justified *ex post* from a realist standpoint), or rendered irrelevant. Reagan’s hawkishness towards the Soviet Union also attracted many former intellectuals of the left wing, who were dismayed at Democrats’ ‘softness’ on foreign policy, to join the Republican party, forming the backbone of the “neo-conservative” movement.

The extent to which the Reagan Doctrine caused the collapse of the Soviet Union, and of Soviet hegemony over Central and Eastern Europe is the subject of disagreement among academic historians and foreign policy analysts. The extent to which it created a compelling focal point in conservative debates over foreign policy is not. The Reagan doctrine and the worldwide struggle against Communism gave conservatism an urgency and a missionary zeal. Many former realists found themselves caught up in the excitement of the Reagan presidency, even while they remained somewhat suspicious of the moral simplicities which seemed to underlie his world view. Most importantly, Reagan’s more aggressive stance seemed to work, undermining Soviet influence in Afghanistan (albeit at a future cost that none of them predicted), and eventually (in their eyes) leading to the collapse of Soviet hegemony in Western Europe. It would not be entirely unfair to say that post-Cold War disagreements over conservatives have been disputes over who has rights to Reagan’s legacy, and how it should be applied in a different era.

⁶ Layne, “The Real Conservative Agenda.”

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union had perverse consequences for the internal coherence and vibrancy of the conservative movement. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, conservative intellectuals like William F. Buckley and Irving Kristol found themselves at a loss.⁷ Market reform seemed like small beer indeed after a decades-long struggle against evil, and conservatives found it difficult to distinguish their policy prescriptions from those of Democrats. Moreover, Reaganite neo-conservatives were out of favour in the Republican circles of power. During the Bush administration, foreign policy decision making was dominated by pragmatic realists such as Brent Scowcroft and James Baker. Realists continued to dominate Republican foreign policy during the Clinton era, opposing, for instance, intervention in former Yugoslavia, and Robert Dole's presidential election campaign was more inclined towards a managerialist perspective on foreign policy than grand visions of fomenting international change.

This led to considerable dissatisfaction among neo-conservatives. In a widely discussed article, William Kristol and Robert Kagan proclaimed that conservatives were "adrift" in foreign policy, and had made "little attempt to set forth the outlines of a conservative view of the world and America's proper role in it."⁸ Kristol and Kagan's article claimed that the major threat remaining in a post-Cold War world was America's own weakness, and reluctance to maintain its position of world leadership. More than ever, the US needed to maintain its military capacity, and to actively intervene in other countries in order to unseat dictators and promote the spread of

⁷ See Corey Robin, "Endgame: Conservatives after the Cold War," *The Boston Review*, available at <http://bostonreview.net/BR29.1/robin.html>.

⁸ William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1996.

democracy. It is interesting that Kristol and Kagan defended a more aggressive foreign policy as being not only necessary to the health of the US, but of the conservative movement, which was otherwise liable to shrivel into a Buchananite rump of me-first nationalists. Without a crusading mission to transform the world, conservatism would lack the sense of purpose necessary for coherence and unity.

This call to action encountered considerable opposition from other conservative thinkers. William Ruger, writing in libertarian house journal *Reason*, denounced Kristol and Kagan's vision as a recipe for foreign policy disaster abroad, and for a bureaucratic leviathan at home.⁹ Kim R. Holmes and John Hillen disputed Kristol and Kagan's account of Reagan's legacy, arguing that it involved hard-headed realism as well as crusading zeal, and that it was the former rather than the latter which had produced results.¹⁰ More pertinently, an international campaign for freedom and democracy would only unite conservatives if it made some tangible contribution to America's security by addressing a visible threat. In the 2000 presidential elections, when George W. Bush was denouncing "nation building" missions, few would have predicted that Kristol and Kagan's analysis would have much influence on foreign policy in a future Republican administration.

Two clear lessons emerge from this potted history of conservative thought in the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War eras. First, the current dispute between "realists" and "neo-conservatives" has deep historical roots. In particular, it reflects earlier divisions between realists

⁹ William Ruger, "Foreign Policy Folly," *Reason* June 2001.

¹⁰ Kim R. Holmes and John Hillen, "Misreading Reagan's Legacy: A Truly Conservative Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1996.

in favour of containment of (and eventually, a more or less tacit accommodation with) the Soviet Union, who dominated Republican foreign policy circles throughout much of the Cold War, and movement conservatives, who viewed themselves as engaged in a moral crusade against the evils of Communism. These differences were to some extent elided during the Reagan presidency, but never disappeared entirely. Second, Reagan's apparent success in facing down the Soviet empire and assisting in its collapse created a paradoxical legacy for conservatives. On the one hand, it seemed to affirm movement conservatives and neo-conservatives' self-image and self-belief - an activist approach to rolling back Soviet hegemony seemed to work. But on the other, by virtue of its very success, it removed the *raison d'etre* of the Reaganite synthesis. As Corey Robin's interviews suggest, many conservatives found themselves at a loss for a new cause.¹¹ While neo-conservatives advocated a muscular approach to international democracy promotion by force, they had no success in recreating the unifying fervor of the Reaganite movement, because they were unable to lay out a clear connection between the spread of democracy, and America's national security. I return to these lessons below.

Current Disputes over Iraq

These divisions have surged back to the surface in the wake of the Iraq debacle. Disagreements between different strains of conservatism were relatively subdued in the lead-up to the Iraq invasion and its immediate aftermath. Although prominent realist academics such as Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, John Mearsheimer and Christopher Layne expressed forceful

¹¹ Corey Robin, "Endgame."

opposition to the invasion, their opposition had little impact on the political debates conducted among conservatives in journals such as the *National Interest*, and *National Review*. Within the Bush administration, there appeared to be a clear unity of purpose between neo-conservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz, realists like Condoleeza Rice and John R. Bolton, and those in intermediate positions such as Richard Cheney. The administration's post September 11 policy stance combined a realist approach to power politics with a strong infusion of neo-conservative idealism. On the one hand, the US intended to maintain its massive military superiority and freedom to forego international institutional entanglements in favour of unilateral action. On the other, it would use its power to promote "regime change" in Iraq and then, it was hoped, Iran, Syria and the Middle East more generally. Indeed, the two went hand-in-hand. Conservatives like Charles Krauthammer argued that it was exactly the US predominance in military terms which would allow it to remake politics across substantial swathes of the globe.

Some prominent conservatives such as Francis Fukuyama expressed "cautions" about the grand project of building "stable and legitimate institutions" in foreign lands, but they were careful to do so *sotto voce*.¹² However, when it became clear that the military occupation of Iraq was failing to produce stability, or the kinds of easy democratic consolidation that some neo-conservatives had predicted, Fukuyama and others began to argue that the Iraq experience provided a damning indictment of neo-conservative arguments. Most particularly, they argued that the neo-conservative project was fundamentally anti-conservative.

Fukuyama's attack on neo-conservatism took the form of a critique of a recent speech by

¹² Francis Fukuyama, "Beyond Our Shores: Today's Foreign Policy has an Idealist Agenda," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 24, 2002.

Charles Krauthammer, which made the case for “democratic realism,” a neo-conservative realist synthesis.¹³ According to Krauthammer, a democratic realist foreign policy would seek to aid the promotion of democracy everywhere, but would only commit “blood and treasure” where there was a strategic necessity, in places central to the war against the “existential enemy.” This would help US security - democracies are more likely to be peaceful and friendly to the US, but would allow cooperation with “authoritarian regimes” such as Pakistan when this proved appropriate for US interests. Given the US’ extraordinary dominance in world affairs (Krauthammer claimed that we were in a ‘unipolar era’), it had the power to reshape the world at least partly in its interests, and help assure its long term hegemony.

Fukuyama claimed that Krauthammer’s reading of world affairs was “strangely disconnected from reality.”¹⁴ In particular, it failed to address the very obvious facts of the Iraq war, which had not gone as Krauthammer and his friends had predicted. In Fukuyama’s argument, Islamic terrorism did not present an existential threat of the same sort as the Soviet Union had. While it did threaten US interests, it was incapable of annihilating the US as the Soviet Union could have. Krauthammer seemed to be arguing that the US should be opposing “enemies of freedom,” *tout court*. Most worryingly, Krauthammer failed to adhere to basic conservative insights about the importance of culture:

Culture is not destiny, but culture plays an important role in making possible certain kinds of

¹³ Charles Krauthammer, *Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World*, the AEI Press, Washington DC, 2004.

¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “The Neoconservative Moment,” *The National Interest*, Summer 2004, pp.57-68.

institutions - something that is usually taken to be a conservative insight. ... I have never believed that democracies can be created anywhere and everywhere through sheer political will. Prior to the Iraq war, there were many reasons for thinking that building a democratic Iraq was a task of a complexity that would be nearly unmanageable.¹⁵

In short, Krauthammer's argument, and the policies of the Bush administration, were guilty of imprudence. Not only that but it failed to recognize that America, for all its great power, was a country with little appetite for nation building or for the construction of democracy in far flung parts of the world. Finally, Krauthammer's vision of unipolarity ignored the question of legitimacy. Others would only follow America's lead if they perceived it as being legitimate, and the unwillingness of the US to seek to legitimate its actions in forums like the UN or NATO meant that it was unable to create a genuine consensus among democracies. While Fukuyama held out hope for a combination of realism and idealism, it would be one that was firmly anchored in a multilateral setting, and in alliances among democracies.

Fukuyama's broadside provoked a ferocious reaction from Krauthammer who claimed for his part that Islamic terrorism was indeed an "existential threat," as it had "intent, objective, and potential capability," and fifth columnists scattered across the globe.¹⁶ Moreover, Iraq was central to the "war against radical Islam" - the democratization of the Islamic world was imperative to American security. The single most important test of the Iraqi project's viability was the "seriousness" of the US - in those historic instances where the US had made a long term commitment (South Korea, Japan, Germany) it had succeeded in building democracies.

¹⁵ p.60, Fukuyama, "The Neo-Conservative Moment."

¹⁶ Charles Krauthammer, "In Defense of Democratic Realism," *The National Interest* (Fall 2004), pp. 15-25.

Fukuyama's criticisms were incoherent, incorrect and possibly anti-Semitic, when they weren't rehashing Krauthammer's own ideas. Others too launched polemics. In a pair of linked articles, Norman Podhoretz claimed that the war against Islamic terrorism was World War IV, and that the various opponents of the Bush administration were rooting for the bad guys to win.¹⁷

Realists, together with "liberal internationalists" and their allies in the media and Democratic Republican parties, were engaged in a deliberate campaign of "distortion and defeatism" to make it appear that Iraq was a lost cause, just as they had done in Vietnam.

Realists retorted in turn that neo-conservative-inspired foreign policy was not only an aberration from the basic tradition of American conservatism, but that it adhered to "the demonstrably false pretense that all nations and cultures share essentially the same values."¹⁸ Even more damning, in John Hulsman and Anatol Lieven's words, neo-conservatism had rejected that prudence described by Burke as "first in the rank of the virtues political and moral," in favour of an ethic of ultimate ends, with a "dangerous tendency to excuse its proponents for responsibility for their actions."¹⁹ In contrast, the prudent pragmatism of realism provided a more ethical approach, which was more open to the hard choices and ambiguous problems that are endemic in "this lower world." Not only does neo-conservatism provide bad policy advice, but it's ethically flawed, an abnegation of responsibility.

¹⁷ Norman Podhoretz, "World War IV: How It Started, What It Means, and Why We Have to Win," *Commentary* (Sep 2004), 118:2, pp. 17-55, and "The War Against World War IV," *Commentary* (Feb 2005), 119:2, 23-43.

¹⁸ Robert F. Ellsworth and Dimitri K. Simes, "Realism's Shining Morality: The Post-Election Trajectory of U.S. Foreign Policy," *The National Interest* Winter 2004/2005, pp.5-10.

¹⁹ John Hulsman and Anatol Lieven, "The Ethics of Realism," *The National Interest*, Summer 2005, pp.4-8.

Thus, in this more recent debate, the original divisions between idealist and realist approaches to foreign policy that were muted during the Reagan presidency have re-emerged, as strong as ever. Neo-conservatives, like the movement conservatives of the 1960's and 1970's, argue in favour of an activist foreign policy, which would remake the world, and take back large swathes of it from the enemy. They specifically depict Islamic terrorism as an existential threat to the existence of the United States, drawing an implicit parallel between it and the Soviet Union. By so doing, they seek to rebuild the conditions of the Reagan years, in which conservatives were more or less unified in their approach to foreign policy, and took their lead from those who depicted the Cold War as a struggle against an enemy that was innately evil, and that could potentially destroy the US. Realists, in contrast, seek to downplay the threat posed by al Qaeda and other organizations, arguing that they present a serious policy challenge, but not an urgent threat. They furthermore point to the very considerable difficulties that neo-conservatives have had in bringing through their plans to change the basis of politics in the Middle East, arguing that this points to fundamental problems in the neo-conservative view of the world. Most fundamentally, they argue that neo-conservatives are not *conservative*, in that they fail to recognize the difficulties of bringing through major social change, and the moral and ethical case for preserving the institutions that have been handed to us.

Critiquing the Debate

In the above two sections, I've tried to give a brief historical account of the US

conservative movement's approach to foreign policy, as well as an overview of the current disputes that divide conservatives. I've claimed that the two are linked, and demonstrated, I hope, that there is not only a similarity between Cold War intra-conservative debates and debates today, but also an organic linkage. That is to say, not only have the basic divisions that existed during the Cold War re-emerged, but also that both sides refer back to the lessons of the Cold War in their current dispute. Neo-conservatives depict the "global war on terror" as a reprise of the Cold War, as World War IV, while realist conservatives view the current situation as quite different from the Cold War, and as involving a far less threatening enemy.

But even if we take neo-conservative claims, and those of their opponents, at face value we find that there are key slippages and blind spots in the argument between conservatives. There's a fundamental lack of seriousness on both sides, which in large part stems from the failure of conservative thought to grapple adequately with the problems of international politics. Keynes famously remarked that those who fail to specify their economic theories are the slaves of defunct economists. Conservatives who regard "theory" as anathema are likewise the slaves of defunct theoretical debates over the relationship between domestic politics and international politics. Both neo-conservatives and realist conservatives implicitly appeal to concepts of this relationship, but they never properly specify what these concepts are, or what they imply. The result is a debate that goes around in circles because both sides of it fail to grasp and confront the arguments and theories underlying the claims that they are making. It is also a debate in which the apparent stakes (the kinds of policies that would be pursued by a conservative administration) are less consistent than the styles of argument. Neo-conservatives who were happy in the 1980's to argue that there was a crucial distinction between "authoritarian" and

“totalitarian” regimes so as to allow the Reagan administration to pursue cooperation with dictatorships now advocate a global crusade for democracy (albeit one which would also allow cooperation with unsavoury dictatorships such as Uzbekistan) and claim that there is no contradiction between their earlier and current positions. As in Wolfe’s tale, while the colour of the uniforms may change, the war continues as before.

I want to make some interlinked claims here as to why the debate among US conservatives is unproductive, and has continued without really advancing since at least the beginnings of the Cold War. First, the debate is not so much between coherent intellectual – or pragmatic - approaches to politics, as between different styles of politics (or to use John Holbo’s somewhat more pejorative term, different political reflexes). Both sides borrow ideas magpie-fashion from more theoretically coherent approaches to the understanding of politics, but fail to acknowledge the baggage that comes along with them. In part as a result the argument is a non-debate - the two sides to it don’t even agree as to what they’re arguing over. Their visions of conservatism are fundamentally incompatible, but because they don’t really ground their ideas or seek out intellectual consistency, they fail to argue in a way that advances debate rather than leading it in circles. Finally, neither version of conservatism is able easily to deal with international politics; while conservatives such as Michael Oakeshott have interesting things to say about politics in general, their arguments have little traction on the kinds of issues and problems encountered in international affairs.

First, on closer inspection, it becomes clear that the debate isn’t so much between coherent sets of claims as to what politics is and what conservatives should do, as between different political dispositions. Now from a conservative perspective, this may not be a bad

thing. Neither attachment to abstract theory nor the pernicky desire for intellectual consistency are held to be conservative virtues. But even from an entirely pragmatic point of view, neither disposition has the minimal degree of coherent attachment to values that conservatives aspire to.

This is most obvious with regard to realist conservatives. Realism in its traditional form famously ignores morals and ethics as guides to foreign policy, instead appealing to the self-interest of nations, and seeking to manage the international system so as to promote stability and avoid debilitating war. This may serve conservative ends. Classic realism borrows heavily from the lessons of Metternich, who sought to use international alliances to protect the *ancien regime* of Europe against the threat of revolutionary change emanating from France. But in a world where (a) the values that conservatives seek to protect are democratic ones (or, at a pinch, republican ones), and (b) where many important countries are neither democracies nor liberal republics, it also involves amoral or positively immoral compromises between those ends and the means that are used to pursue them. In order to pursue alliances against common enemies, it is often necessary to ignore one's allies' values and domestic systems of government. If one's enemies are sufficiently powerful, it may be better to pursue a tacit or active accommodation with them than to seek out war, even if the values of the enemy are antithetical to one's own. In short, realism preaches that the world of international politics is at best one of moral compromises, and at worst one in which morality fails to enter at all.

This means that US realist conservatives have always been vulnerable to attack from movement conservatives who see them as making immoral compromises with the enemy, and thus traducing the basic conservative tenet that politics should be subordinated to a transcendent moral order. The classic realist rejoinder - that international politics is a realm of moral

ambiguity and compromise - sits at best very uncomfortably with the basic conservative claim that politics should be governed by moral values. As a result, realist conservatives have tended to eschew the blunt cynicism and reference of national interest of the international relations theorists from whom they borrow. Instead, they have tended to resort to the Burkean argument for prudence as a justification for their stance.²⁰ Prudence, the “god of this lower world” is held to be the highest virtue of the statesman. In the most recent formulations of realist conservatism, prudence is held to provide a justifying ethical framework for realism, which is indeed better than the purportedly more ethical approach of neo-conservatism, because it recognizes that good intentions will be disastrous if they are not accompanied by a tempered understanding of which policies are likely to succeed or fail.²¹

Arguments from prudence provide an excellent basis for a stringent critique of neo-conservative policies, which seek to rewrite the basic principles of politics in Iraq and elsewhere. However, they provide at best an extremely weak positive justification for the practice of realist foreign policy itself. The reason is straightforward. The Burkean notion of prudence is closely and intimately linked to the claim that existing traditions have a value in themselves, and constitute a living heritage from our ancestors, which we should in turn hand to our descendants. These traditions have value and moral standing because they constitute a set of intimate and organic ties of mutual obligation, which in turn create our lived community. In this framework then, prudence - the notion that wide-reaching reform ought to be thought through carefully

²⁰ See John R. Bolton, “The Prudent Irishman: Edmund Burke’s Realism,” *The National Interest*, Winter 1997/1998.

²¹ John Hulsman and Anatol Lieven, “The Ethics of Realism.”

before being applied, if it is applied at all - has obvious attractions. It reflects a bias in favour of continuation or careful reform of those traditions that have been handed down to us, and against policies or actions that might disrupt those traditions and the broader community. However, by the same token it is only really applicable in contexts where there *is* an organic community, or something that can reasonably be defended as same. This is eminently not the case for international politics, where the elements of community that exist are at best exceedingly slight, and in large part consist of international norms and obligations that conservatives reject to the extent that they interfere with norms at the national level. Instead, international politics is more typically characterized by power politics, and by alliances that are based on mutual convenience and interest rather than on friendship.²² Conservatives such as John Hulsman²³ have sought to make a positive conservative case that the alliances and structures of international politics that we have inherited from the Cold War should be considered as part of our patrimony, and that prudence in maintaining these relationships provides an ethical underpinning for realism.²⁴ But in the absence of any genuine community at the international level, the organic relationship between past generations and present that Burke prizes so highly doesn't really exist, and prudence in international affairs is shorn of any moral or ethical value that it might have,

²² Conservatives may reasonably argue that there are exceptions to this claim. Burke himself argues that Europe is "is virtually one great state having the same basis of general law, with some diversity of provincial customs and local establishments. The nations of Europe have had the very same Christian religion, agreeing in the fundamental parts, varying a little in the ceremonies and in the subordinate doctrines." A modern conservative might make a similar argument for the "special relationship" between the UK and US. Yet this misses the point that the most major foreign policy problems and relations between states do not involve this kind of community.

²³ Colloquium at the George Washington University, May 2005, get exact dates.

²⁴ John Hulsman and Anatol Lieven, "The Ethics of Realism."

becoming merely a warning against hubris and revolutionary change in foreign policy.

The result is that “prudence” all too easily justifies maintenance of the status quo, and for the pursuit of national interest through means that may very well be antithetical to the values that conservatives supposedly prize. Far from providing a higher ethical justification for realism, it’s at best a tattered figleaf that only imperfectly conceals the power politics and pursuit of selfish national interest that lies beneath. Realist conservatives can’t import a fundamentally realist view of international affairs, and how best to conduct foreign policy without also accepting the baggage that comes along with it - a view of international politics that characterizes it as at best a realm of deep moral ambiguity. In realist conservatism, John Kenneth Galbraith’s dictum that conservatism consists of the search for a higher moral justification for selfishness hits home.

Yet the same is true in a somewhat more subtle sense of neo-conservative approaches to foreign policy. Here, the problem is twofold. As realist conservatives charge, neo-conservatives have failed to connect the means and ends of their policy, holding in effect that the purity of their intentions and the undoubted desirability of spreading democracy *ceteris paribus* provide sufficient justification for, say, the invasion of other countries. Yet there is also a more fundamental problem. There is some evidence suggesting that the values that neo-conservatives claim to be promoting are less important than the pursuit of those values themselves. More bluntly: they sometimes appear to be more interested in pursuing a crusade than in the actual cause on behalf of which they are crusading.

First, neo-conservatives have tended to justify their policies in terms of their ultimate goals rather than their proximate results. As their critics have pointed out, this fails Max Weber’s

basic test of political seriousness.²⁵ In Weber's argument, politics requires that one moves away from an ethic of ultimate ends towards an ethic of responsibility, which recognizes that it is necessary to examine a political action's likely consequences as well as its goal, before deciding whether it is worthwhile or not.²⁶ While neo-conservatives and those sympathetic to them have defended the plausibility of their empirical claims,²⁷ they have done so in rather uncertain terms, arguing not so much that their proposals for major reform are likely to succeed, as that risky measures are necessary, given the likely consequences of inaction.

Second, there is evidence to suggest that neo-conservatives' attachment to conservative values is somewhat uncertain. There is reason to suspect that neo-conservatives aren't as serious as they should be when they argue that al Qaeda is an existential threat that can only be negated by spreading democracy throughout the Middle East. More generally, even if one takes neo-conservatives arguments at their face value, it isn't quite clear what their ultimate goal is. William Kristol and William Kagan's article (and subsequent edited volume) provides a good example of this, as it slips back and forth between three levels of argument. First, Kristol and Kagan claim to be providing a new vision that will unify a conservative movement that is

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ I note here that Weber's account of political responsibility provides a more valuable critique of those who do not accept this responsibility than positive set of prescriptions for action. As Weber repeatedly stresses, the "ethic of responsibility" is an ethic of *personal* responsibility, which reflects the particular, and very possibly idiosyncratic values of the politician, rather than either a set of generalizable principles or universal values. Weber's idiosyncratic version of agonistic liberalism is therefore inimical both to traditional natural law conservatism (which he regards as a kind of infantilism, a refusal to recognize that there are many gods, not one, and they are at war with one another) and modern liberalism (which discounts the agonistic elements of politics). See further Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation."

²⁷ Charles Krauthammer, "A Defense of Democratic Realism."

“adrift” and “confused.” Second, they claim to be providing a means towards maintaining America’s dominance and hegemony over the world. Finally, they claim to be providing a vision for a new world order, where democracy, free markets and liberty would be spread to the corners of the earth. Kristol and Kagan decline to provide a rank-ordering of these goals, simply asserting that “[a] neo-Reaganite foreign policy would be good for conservatives, good for America, and good for the world.

This perpetual shuttling back and forth of goals, in which a vital and unified American conservative movement means the maintenance of American dominance which allows America to take on a *mission civilisatrice* which creates a vital and unified conservative movement feels more like a sleight-of-hand than a serious argument. And indeed, there is some reason to suspect that Kristol and Kagan’s primary interest is in revitalizing the American conservative movement. As Corey Robin has argued,²⁸ both neo-conservatives like Irving Kristol and David Brooks and more traditional conservatives such as William F. Buckley appear to have been in the market in the late 1990’s for an existential struggle between good and evil, a rationale for crusade that would make politics seem exciting and meaningful. In David Brooks complaint, ““The striking thing about the 1990s zeitgeist was the presumption of harmony. The era was shaped by the idea that there were no fundamental conflicts anymore.”²⁹ It’s obviously easier to cast politics in sweeping moral terms when you can use a struggle of this sort as a metric, even if the struggle isn’t really there, or isn’t the kind of struggle that you claim it is. It’s also easier to galvanize the conservative movement into action:

²⁸ Corey Robin, “Endgame.”

²⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*

Without a broader, more enlightened understanding of America's interests, conservatism will too easily degenerate into the pinched nationalism of Buchanan's America First, where the appeal to narrow self-interest masks a deeper form of self-loathing. A true conservatism of the heart ought to emphasize both personal and national responsibility, relish the opportunity for national engagement, embrace the possibility of national greatness, and restore a sense of the heroic, which has been sorely lacking from American foreign policy -- and from American conservatism -- in recent years.³⁰

This emphasis on conservatism as a movement which must have a sense of the heroic lest it dwindle into mere selfishness, has the paradoxical effect of emptying out the core of conservatism. Kristol and Kagan suggest that what matters is a sense of “national greatness” rather than a specific set of virtues, or goals, or policies. Rather than being a defence of a particular set of transcendent values, conservatism becomes a kind of perpetual crusade, a continued attempt to create a sense of national greatness and of heroic endeavour. The *content* of politics - the particular tasks that the heroes must carry out, and the dragons that they must slay - becomes secondary to the heroic *form*. Here, conservatism is reduced to nothing more than a more-or-less aesthetic disposition towards politics, a kind of “proto-cognitive itch.”³¹ Not so much a commitment to a set of transcendent values, or even a pragmatic Burkean attachment to tradition, as a desire that politics provide a sense of the heroic.

Thus, the argument between realists and neo-conservatives isn't really an argument in the sense that we usually understand it. The real disagreements are usually left unstated or semi-stated, because they are less about the substance of politics than the style. Neither realist

³⁰ William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Towards a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy.”

³¹ John Holbo, “Dead Right,” available at http://examinedlife.typepad.com/johnbelle/2003/11/dead_right.html.

conservatism or neo-conservatism provides a positive guide to how politics should be conducted that accords with conservative claims about how politics should be conducted. While realists claim to be defending the role of prudence in international affairs, prudence, shorn of a commitment to moral values, translates merely into the considered pursuit of self interest. On the other hand, neo-conservatives' commitment to a values-based foreign policy seems on the one hand to be impracticable and imprudent, and on the other to have a distinct tendency to decay into the pursuit of heroic politics for the sake of heroism itself.

Neither approach provides the basis for a genuinely conservative analysis of foreign policy and international relations. On the one hand, conservative realists acknowledge the moral ambiguity of international politics - but in so doing advocate a kind of conservatism that is ethically empty, a pursuit of self-interest dressed up under the pretty name of prudence. On the other, neo-conservatives claim to adhere to values, and to provide a moral basis for foreign policy - but (even if one takes their arguments at face value) only do so by ignoring the international system as it actually exists. The international system - a realm of politics which has at best a minimal ethical content - is a hostile realm for the conservative approach to human behaviour.

The failure of both realists and neo-conservatives to face up to this problem means that they are conducting a non-debate, in which they skirt around the main issue. The problem that conservatives face is not in deciding which approach to take to foreign policy - it is in justifying the applicability of conservative thought to a realm of human interaction in which the transcendent values that conservatives appeal to as foundations for the political order don't seem to apply. Instead of confronting this problem, both sides of the argument choose to shuffle it

under the carpet, realists by claiming that “prudence” provides a sufficient basis for morality in international affairs, and neo-conservatives by denying that there is any very serious problem in building a foreign policy based on values in an international system which seems hostile to those values.

Conclusions

In the above, I’ve set out a brief history of the US conservative movement’s debates over foreign policy post-WW II. I’ve then described the current debate over the Iraq war and its aftermath, and tried to link the two together. Then, in a lengthy discussion section, I’ve tried to get at some of the underlying problems in the debate. My argument is straightforward - that conservatives have great difficulty in applying the traditional forms of conservative thought to international relations, a realm of human interaction in which it’s difficult to see how there are transcendent values that might inform politics. The current debate over the Iraq war - as the debates that have gone before it - is an extended exercise in ducking this point, to which neither realist conservatives nor neo-conservatives have a very good answer.

This isn’t to say that there mightn’t be an interesting conservative rebuttal to my argument. Two possible lines of argument might be developed, one of which seems bound to fail, but the other of which might have some fruitful possibilities. First is the argument of Charles Krauthammer that the appropriate foreign policy for the US is “democratic realism,” which would combine the neo-conservative commitment to democracy with a realist approach to

the conduct of foreign affairs.³² This is less a meaningful synthesis than a quite unconvincing attempt to elide the fundamental antagonism between realist and idealist approaches to foreign policy, which shades in practice into a hypocritical justification for intervention when it is in America's interests and for failing to intervene when it is not.

The second approach is perhaps more promising. In his critique of Krauthammer, Fukuyama seems to be starting to argue for a reconstruction of American foreign policy so that it would encourage the creation of multilateral institutions that would foster cooperation between democracies. This would in principle begin to address the fundamental problem of values in international politics, by advocating a limited (and perhaps feasible) set of reforms that would make the international realm more comfortable for conservatives, by increasing the realm of international interactions subject to values. However, this argument is at best embryonic in its current state.

³² Charles Krauthammer, "Democratic Realism."