

*A Response to Lee Ruddin***‘Cabals’ and ‘Conspiracies’? The Caricature and the Reality of  
Opposition to Neoconservatism and the Bush Administration**

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Despite its flamboyant bluster, Lee Ruddin’s article fails to convince on almost every level. At times the author seems to have been more concerned with rhetorical shock and awe tactics than with any of the facts pertaining to neoconservatism. Ruddin fails to engage with any of the substantial criticisms made by opponents of both neoconservatism and the Bush administration, preferring instead to construct a crude caricature of what he might like those criticisms to be. Unfortunately for him, his ludicrous claims and almost complete lack of evidence amount to nothing more than a straw man which is easy for Ruddin to knock down and conveniently allows him to avoid engaging with any of the actual criticisms of neoconservative strategy made by its opponents. In addition, Ruddin displays a poor understanding of what neoconservatism actually is and what its relationship to the Bush administration is.

Ruddin’s most contentious, although by now somewhat tired, claim is that opponents of neoconservatism are motivated merely by anti-Semitism: to them, he says, “neocoon means Jewish”. When this slanderous claim was recently made by David Brooks, the neoconservative columnist for the *New York Times*, Brooks was forced to retract it and issue an apology.<sup>1</sup> Like Brooks, Ruddin is unable to offer any reliable evidence to substantiate this claim and fails to give a single example of an anti-Semitic comment by an opponent of neoconservatism. He relies for ‘proof’ on mere *assertions* of anti-Semitism from Richard Perle, David Frum and Francis Fukuyama --- hardly the most objective sources since all have a vested interest in deflecting any legitimate criticism of neoconservatism and who do not, themselves, point to any actual examples of anti-Semitic comments in the works cited by Ruddin.

The case of Pat Robertson, which Ruddin refers to (footnote 63) is an unusual and unrepresentative one.<sup>2</sup> Ruddin conflates Christian Zionism with criticism of the neoconservatives. Pat Robertson’s hostility is not particularly directed at the neocons, indeed he is not even known particularly as a critic of neoconservatism. His beliefs about Judaism pre-date the emergence of the neocons (who, incidentally, are not all Jewish anyway). Robertson is a Christian Zionist who believes that Jews will have to convert to Christianity at the Second Coming of Christ, a belief which can obviously appear

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offensive to Jewish people. He has also made comments implying a global Jewish conspiracy --- obnoxious to be sure, but a belief which pre-dates the influence of the neocons. In fact Robertson made similar comments during the Clinton years, indicating that, as crude as some of his beliefs might be, he is not a neocon conspiracy theorist, as Ruddin would have it.

In fact, despite the aforementioned comments, Robertson has enjoyed very good relations with some of the pro-Israeli groups in the US because he supports the creation of a greater Israel, believing that the sooner the Jewish people are returned there, the sooner the Second Coming will take place. In 2002, Robertson received the State of Israel Friendship Award from the Zionist Organisation of America.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, one of the so-called 'godfathers' of neoconservatism, Norman Podhoretz, has defended Pat Robertson on the grounds that, although he might make some questionable comments about Jewish people, he can be forgiven because of his support for Israel.<sup>4</sup> Consequently not even Robertson fits the caricature that Ruddin attempts to construct.

Similarly, throughout his article, Ruddin refers to how "neoconservative conspiracy theorists" make sinister references to a "cabbalist seizure of foreign policy"; but again there is no supporting evidence, aside from one solitary reference to an offbeat, thoroughly arcane magazine by the name of *Paranoia: the Conspiracy Reader* --- not exactly the journal of choice for serious commentators (or many other people either) and in which one could presumably find questionable theories about anything, not just neoconservatism. In any case, the example (if it exists--Ruddin does not quote it) is not representative. The references to "cabals" are Ruddin's own words, not the words of a conspiracy theorist. No doubt there has been some uninformed comment in the blogosphere on these issues, however Ruddin not only fails to provide any examples of that, but more seriously, produces only one purported example of it from a reputable commentator: Michael Lind's *New Statesman* article, in Ruddin's opinion, "adopts overtly conspiratorial language", although a review of the article does not show any factual inaccuracies or outlandish assumptions, which one might expect in a conspiracy theory.<sup>5</sup> These half-hearted examples are hardly enough to base Ruddin's entire argument on. Where it does exist, the type of analysis Ruddin refers to is clearly on the margins and not taken seriously by any respectable critics, who prefer to make legitimate criticisms of actual neoconservative strategy and policies. Ruddin would probably not trouble himself to engage with many serious liberal critiques of the Iraq war, such as those by Michael Klare, Noam Chomsky and even Michael Scheuer but where, for example, is his recognition of the realist opposition to the war? John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, later on Brent Scowcroft, as well as the new lobby group, the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy (composed mainly of scholars from the realist tradition), made cogent critiques of the war from a realist perspective that disputed the premises on which the conflict was based.<sup>6</sup> All of this legitimate criticism is ignored completely by Ruddin in favour of a crude caricature, the kernel of which was only ever peripheral and ephemeral.

Ruddin's third main claim about opponents of neoconservatism is that they believe that "neocon means foreign policy hawk" and that this is an unacceptable misapplication of the term neoconservative. It is true that there are other kinds of hawks and not just

neoconservative ones, but nevertheless saying that most neocons are hawks is simply a statement of fact, an observation based on their political stances. Even William Kristol himself accepts the term ‘hawk’:

*Interviewer:* What [name] do you like?

*Kristol:* I don’t care.... I would take “neo-Reaganite”, “neoconservative”, “hawk”, “American imperialist”. There are lots of different phrases.<sup>7</sup>

Neocons favour the offensive projection of American power, want to normalise the policy of regime change and support preventive wars to preclude the emergence of rival powers.<sup>8</sup> Does Ruddin dispute that someone with these views could legitimately be called, amongst other things, a hawk?

A further claim made by Ruddin about opponents of neoconservatism is that they pejoratively assume that Bush has limited understanding of the strategy enunciated by the neocons and that he is the product of their ideas, having embraced them after 9/11. On the first point, Bush was a self-confessed foreign policy novice during his campaign and recruited a number of neocons (as well as other conservatives) to educate him.<sup>9</sup> That they would therefore have at least a better understanding of the ideas that they tutored him in is not unrealistic. Secondly, Ruddin may consider it derogatory to claim that Bush was a product of his handlers, but in recent interviews with this author, both William Kristol and Charles Krauthammer claimed that Bush had indeed been shaped by the neoconservatives. Both men argued that 9/11 left Bush looking for a way to understand what had happened and that he turned to neoconservative ideas because they gave him a viable framework through which to understand the world.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, on a related point, Ruddin misrepresents the argument critical of neoconservatism made by Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke in their book *America Alone: The Neoconservatives and the Global Order*. Halper and Clarke “treat the later neoconservatives as organic extensions of the former ones”, says Ruddin. In fact they do the exact opposite. Halper and Clarke draw an explicit distinction between the first and second generation of neoconservatives and argue that “the expression of neoconservatism that emerged in the latter 1990s... was *an entirely new political animal. It was unable to place its heritage anywhere among the first-generation neoconservatives...*”<sup>11</sup> (italics mine). The second generation also had “a reduced intellectual focus”, according to Halper and Clarke, overlooking many of the social issues that had animated the first generation.<sup>12</sup> To acknowledge the distinction that Halper and Clarke draw, however, would complicate Ruddin’s task of making it appear that critics of neoconservatism are unable or unwilling to comprehend its complexity.

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Ruddin’s confusion about the actual concept of neoconservatism is evident in a number of ways. Firstly, he argues that “[u]ltimately, there is *[sic]* few defining attributes one can ascribe to neo-cons which cannot be easily falsified with counter-examples.” However, they do indeed share many common positions. Almost all of the second generation

neocons believe in the concept of benevolent global (American) hegemony and that this is justified on the basis that moral goals and strategic interests are “almost always in harmony”.<sup>13</sup> If we look back at the positions the neocons took on Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq, we see a considerable degree of uniformity. To be sure, there were some disagreements, as there are amongst any group of political minds, but on Bosnia, almost all the neoconservatives favoured lifting the arms embargo and Nato air strikes; in Kosovo, they almost all supported Nato air strikes in order to preserve the integrity of the Nato alliance and American leadership in Europe; and in Iraq, they all supported regime change through invasion as a means to enhance American global pre-eminence.<sup>14</sup>

Ruddin further argues that the Bush administration was not influenced by the neoconservatives in its decision to go to war in Iraq because Bush genuinely believed that there were WMD and the neocons did not (“If the Bush administration genuinely believed that Iraq possessed WMD, neo-conservatism cannot be considered a prerequisite for favouring war.”) A cursory look back at the Project for the New American Century’s letter to Bill Clinton on Iraq in January 1998 reveals that neoconservatives did use the WMD issue as justification for war in Iraq<sup>15</sup> (although for political expediency their rationale was expanded to include terrorism post-9/11). This has implications for Ruddin’s broader conclusions about the relationship between the Bush administration and the neoconservatives.

He is also confused about when and how (and indeed whether) the neocons advocate promoting democracy and whether the Bush administration is doing the same. Ruddin endorses Steven Hurst’s view that, unlike the Bush administration, the neocons want to complete a global democratic revolution. However, although they may talk about democracy, the devil is in the detail. Most neocons reject the notion of using hard power solely for the purpose of democratization, preferring instead soft power initiatives, as long as they do not conflict with the broader goal of American hegemony. As Joshua Muravchik put it in 1996: “[r]arely should force be used for values alone. It should be reserved for situations where our interests are at stake”.<sup>16</sup> And as Robert Kagan explains, the “*prudent*” support for democracy requires “using all the many tools at [our] disposal, *most of them well short of military force*” (first italics in original, second added).<sup>17</sup> This has implications for why the neoconservatives supported the use of hard power in Iraq that Ruddin fails to address and further implications for the degree of convergence between the neocons and other conservative unipolarists in the Bush administration.

The final point in this regard concerns Ruddin’s claim that a central plank of the Bush administration’s foreign policy has been “attempting to achieve democracy rather than merely stability in post-war Afghanistan/Iraq”. If Ruddin really believes that neoconservatives do advocate a global democratic revolution then his earlier assertion that the Bush administration was not influenced by them is contradicted entirely by his point quoted above. In any case, he is wrong on all counts. The Bush administration has, at every step of the way, attempted to promote a pro-American regime in Baghdad. This is not the same thing as a principled commitment to democracy. Elections in Iraq were initially postponed and the US ordered the Basic Law (which would be the law guiding the drafting of the permanent constitution) to be written under US tutelage by non-elected

officials. Before sovereignty was handed over, the US illegally privatized Iraq's utilities (by selling them to American corporations) and imposed strict structural adjustment economic plans on Iraq without consulting the population. Regardless of the merits (or not) of these plans, Iraq's economic future was decided by Washington and this will severely restrict the political and economic actions of any future governments which will be required to conform to the rules of both the International Monetary Fund and international financial markets. The US has also ignored the election platform of the United Iraqi Alliance which triumphed in the first national election on a platform of ending the occupation. Moreover, the *New York Times* reported in March 2006 that Bush delivered a message to the main Shiite parliamentary bloc that he "doesn't want, doesn't support, doesn't accept" Ibrahim al-Jaafari as Prime Minister.<sup>18</sup>

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In addition to his caricature of the opponents of neoconservatism and his misunderstanding of the nature of neoconservatism and its relationship to the Bush administration, there is one other significant weakness in Ruddin's argument. He attempts to give a normative justification of Niall Ferguson's argument that a world with a hegemonic power is more stable than one without. Unfortunately Ruddin again fails to discuss any actual examples of how this works in practice, relying instead on abstract analogous examples from Ancient Greece and the eighteenth century war on piracy as his 'proof'. There are no contemporary examples given of how US hegemony apparently keeps a lid on conflicts that would otherwise explode. More significantly, there is no discussion of the consequences of imposing American power where it is not wanted. In order to maintain its hegemony, a superpower defines its national interest as global preponderance and this requires imposition of its power, often in places where it is not welcome. This very often has the effect of provoking opposition to the superpower and can lead to dangerous instability. What about, for example, the US-backed coup in Iran in 1953 and its clear relationship to the Islamic revolution of 1979? What about the democratically elected Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, who opposes the US-led economic system? Ruddin fails to recognise that imposing power can lead to instability and that this can be a source of problems rather than a solution.

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In sum, Ruddin's article appears to be designed, for the most part, to avoid engaging with any of the actual criticisms that have been made of neoconservative policies and instead construct a sensationalist caricature that is, at times, slanderous to those who make the genuine criticisms that Ruddin has chosen not to discuss. Neoconservatism and the foreign policy of the Bush administration stand or fall on their own merits. Candid discussions of these issues would be welcome, but only when participants are willing to make an intellectually honest attempt to understand them.

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<sup>1</sup> For excerpts from Brooks' column and his retraction see Matthew Bargainer, 'Note to David Brooks: That Joke Isn't Funny Any More', January 12<sup>th</sup> 2004 on the web magazine *antiwar.com* at <http://antiwar.com/bargainer/index.php?articleid=1566>

<sup>2</sup> On Pat Robertson's beliefs and relationship with the American-Jewish community, see Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005): 215-18

<sup>3</sup> See press release on Robertson's web site at

<http://www.patrobertson.com/PressReleases/ZionistAward.asp>

<sup>4</sup> On Podhoretz, and others, defence of Robertson and the Christian Zionists, see Friedman, *Neoconservative Revolution*: 215-8

<sup>5</sup> Michael Lind, 'The Weird Men Behind George W. Bush's War', *New Statesman*, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2003, reproduced online at [http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Politicians/WeirdMen\\_BehindBushsWar.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Politicians/WeirdMen_BehindBushsWar.html)

<sup>6</sup> For liberal critiques of the war and its prosecution, see Michael Klare, *Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Oil Dependency* (London, Penguin 2005); Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2003); Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror* (Dulles, Virginia, Brassey's Inc. 2004). For realist debate, see for example, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, 'An Unnecessary War', *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2003, reproduced online at <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/walt.htm>; Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Breaking Ranks: What Turned Brent Scowcroft Against the Bush Administration?' *The New Yorker*, October 31<sup>st</sup> 2005, online at [http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/051031fa\\_fact2](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/051031fa_fact2) See also the website of the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy at <http://www.realisticforeignpolicy.org> The group campaigns for "a restrained foreign policy that protects America's interests". In addition a group of thirty-three international relations scholars, mostly from the realist tradition, took out an advert in the *New York Times* on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2002 (p.A29) to protest the coming war on the basis that there was no credible evidence that Saddam Hussein was co-operating with Al Qaeda, that a war could foment regional instability and could become a quagmire for US troops. The advert is reproduced at

[http://www.geocities.com/tom\\_slouck/iraq/scholars\\_against\\_iraq\\_war.html](http://www.geocities.com/tom_slouck/iraq/scholars_against_iraq_war.html)

<sup>7</sup> PBS *Frontline*, 'The War Behind Closed Doors', aired February 20<sup>th</sup> 2003, interview with William Kristol online at, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/iraq/interviews/kristol.html>

<sup>8</sup> For a good summary of neoconservative ideas on foreign policy, see William Kristol and Robert Kagan (eds.) *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco, Encounter Books, 2000)

<sup>9</sup> James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York, Viking, 2004), chapter 16.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Charles Krauthammer, conducted 6<sup>th</sup> February 2006. Interview with William Kristol, conducted 9<sup>th</sup> February 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neoconservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004): 100-01

<sup>12</sup> Halper & Clarke, *America Alone*: 101

<sup>13</sup> Quote taken from William Kristol and Robert Kagan, 'Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1996, reproduced online at <http://www.ceip.org/people/kagfaff.htm> Interview with Joshua Muravchik, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2006; Charles Krauthammer, 'The Neoconservative Convergence', *Commentary*, July-August 2005: 21-26; Michael Ledeen, *Freedom Betrayed: How America Led a Global Democratic Revolution, Won the Cold War and Walked Away* (Washington, AEI Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> For representative, although by no means the only, examples, see 'What the West Must Do in Bosnia', *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern Edition), September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1993, p.A12; Project for the New American Century, letter to President Clinton on Slobodan Milosevic, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1998,

[http://www.newamericancentury.org/balkans\\_pdf\\_04.pdf](http://www.newamericancentury.org/balkans_pdf_04.pdf) and project for the New American Century, letter to President Clinton on Iraq, January 26<sup>th</sup> 1998, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm>

<sup>15</sup> PNAC letter to Clinton, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership: A Challenge to Neo-Isolationism* (Washington, AEI Press, 1996): 163

<sup>17</sup> Robert Kagan, 'Exporting Democracy, by Joshua Muravchik' (Book Review), *Commentary*, August 1991: 56

<sup>18</sup> These events have been covered extensively in the press, but for an outstanding discussion of the imposition of a US-friendly economic programme and the illegal sale of the Iraqi state's assets, see Naomi Klein, 'Baghdad Year Zero: Pillaging Iraq in Pursuit of a Neocon Utopia', *Harpers*, September 2004: 43-

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53. Also, Naomi Klein, 'Sorry George, Iraq Has Given You the Purple Finger', *The Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2005. Quote taken from 'Bush Opposes Iraq's Premier, Shiites Told', *New York Times*, March 29<sup>th</sup> 2006.