

Neocons—Down but Not Out

By Michael Flynn | December 15, 2005

Of all the personnel changes that have occurred in the Bush administration during the first year of the president's second term, the most striking has been the marked decrease in the number of high-level officials who are associated with the neoconservative political movement.

Most notable in this regard include the departures of Paul Wolfowitz, the former number two at the Pentagon who now heads the World Bank; Douglas Feith, a loyal Wolfowitz deputy who resigned early this year after spurring embarrassing allegations about the government's handling of pre-war intelligence as head of the secretive Pentagon intel shop called the Office of Special Plans; and I. Lewis Libby, a man who no longer requires introduction.

To this list one could also add John Bolton, the former State Department official and a neoconservative fellow-traveler who was appointed, over the objections of Congress, to be the U.S. representative to the United Nations. Although still a member of the Bush administration, Bolton's exit from State spurred a sigh of relief from commentators who preferred seeing him wreak havoc in the dysfunctional UN bureaucracy rather than on the direction of U.S. foreign policy.

Although the neoconservatives have lost representation in government, it would be a mistake to think that just because of a minor embarrassment like a war gone terribly awry they have slunk into the shadows. In fact, their efforts to push their agenda have continued with similar fervor and energy that characterized their campaign to push for war in Iraq.

As a relatively small group of ideologues, pundits, and writers, the neoconservatives have long relied on building coalitions among other political factions. This strategy was epitomized by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which during the years preceding the Iraq War enlisted an impressive grouping of individuals from the right and center to

sign on to open letters arguing for a tougher line in the Middle East.

But while PNAC may be having a tougher time piecing together its letter-writing coalitions—as its dearth of recent public statements seems to attest—other neoconservative outfits have had success on this front. One of the more curious efforts is their association with the U.S. Copts, an Egyptian-Christian human rights and democracy group. (1) In mid-November, several key neoconservatives—including Nina Shea of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom, the *Weekly Standard's* Fred Barnes, and Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—participated in the “Second Annual Coptic Conference on Democracy in Egypt,” an event that was promoted by the neoconservative-dominated public-relations firm Benador Associates. (2)

According to the *Christian Post*, the conference resulted in a series of draft resolutions promoting religious freedom and democracy in the “Arab world's most populous nation amid its parliamentary elections.” Despite the conference's call for increased democracy, however, the *Christian Post* lamented the results of the second round of elections in Egypt in November, which saw an increase in the number of representatives from the Muslim Brotherhood. The Rev. Dr. Keith Roderick of Christian Solidarity International, told the *Post*, “With ongoing antagonism toward Christians and radical ideals of Muslim Brotherhood, religious freedom and human rights activists are looking to achieve individual rights and freedoms to create a true democracy in Egypt.” (5)

Also involved in organizing the event was the Coalition for the Defense of Human Rights, whose web project, DHIMMI, provides updates “on the status of People of the Book (Jews and Christians) under Islamic rule.” Among the Coalition’s list of “members and friends” are an array of Middle Eastern and Asian Christian and human rights organizations, as well as several key neoconservative-aligned pressure groups, including the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and the *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, a joint publication of the U.S. Committee for a Free Lebanon and the Middle East Forum. (3)

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David Meunier, president of the American Coptic Association and an organizer of the November conference, is no stranger to neoconservative campaigns. In July 2005, for example, Meunier added his name to a “statement of principles” published by Freedom House regarding “the suffering people of North Korea and the threats posed by its regime to world security.” This statement, which was signed by dozens of “concerned American religious, human rights, security, social, and civil leaders,” included representatives of several key neoconservative and evangelical outfits, including the Institute on Religion and Public Policy, the Association of

Life-Giving Churches, Gary Bauer’s American Values, the National Association of Evangelicals, AEI’s New Atlantic Initiative, and the Center for Religious Freedom. Also signing on were Ken Adelman (as a member of the Defense Policy Board), Max Kampelman (as a former U.S. State Department Ambassador), and Michael O’Hanlon (as token liberal and scholar at Brookings). Noticeably absent from the statement were any of the more established human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, or Amnesty International. (4)

Among its proposals, the statement argued that “legislation modeled on the Jackson-Vanik and anti-apartheid laws should be immediately drafted, and actively considered, in response to China’s grossly unlawful and inhumane treatment of North Korean refugees.” Evoking the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment was not just some empty rhetorical gesture. That amendment, which called for Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union and was championed by Sen. Henry “Scoop” Jackson and his faithful servant Richard Perle, is widely considered “the opening shot fired against Cold War détente,” as Michael Hirsh put it in a January 2005 article for *Newsweek*. (6)

Although busy building strategic alliances around human rights and democracy in parts of the world of concern to the neoconservatives, they have not lost sight of what is arguably their big prize—continued U.S. intervention in the Middle East. Even while U.S. troops are bogged down in an ugly counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq, the neoconservatives have picked up their efforts pushing for wider military engagement in the region, focusing particular attention on Iran. And key to this campaign is another central weapon in their arsenal—the media.

In early November, the neoconservative mouthpiece the *Weekly Standard* published an article by AEI scholar Reuel Marc Gerech in which the former CIA analyst argued: “Are we willing to use military force to back up a nuclear counterproliferation regime against a state with a long record in terrorism, whose ruling elite is probably the most anti-American on earth? If we are not, then nuclear counterproliferation is effectively over.” Haranguing

the Bush administration for being as soft on Iran as Clinton was on North Korea, Gerecht concludes that the White House must “batter the CIA until it [begins] the slow and difficult process of trying to make contact with the anti-Khamenei forces among Iran’s mullahs. In all probability, irreversible evolution or regime crackup will be driven by clerical dissent, not by Iranian liberals, progressives, or others with whom counterrevolutionary American-Iranian expatriates are comfortable.” (7)

In late November AEI “Freedom Scholar” Michael Ledeen, writing in the *National Review*, also lambasted the Bush administration for its “preemptive appeasement” of Iran, which he said “inevitably weakens the forces of democratic revolution in the Middle East and elsewhere, as it greatly cheers the tyrants who, just a few months ago, were seriously considering the best place to take early retirement.” Although Bush “has made many statements about the evils of the mullahcracy in Tehran,” continued Ledeen, “he has not only failed to carry out any action against the Islamic republic, he has repeatedly authorized unannounced meetings with Iranian representatives, in a futile effort to work out some kind of deal by which Iran would promise to limit its support for terrorism, especially inside Iraq, and we would promise, or hint, or imply, that we wouldn’t attempt to support democratic revolution in Iran.” (8)

Ledeen kept up the drum beat in an article for the *New York Post* a few days later, in which he grouped Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia together as targets for intervention: “Left to their own devices, the Iranians, Saudis, and Syrians will find new stratagems, no doubt hoping to win a political victory in America even if they cannot win a terror war in the Middle East. The president cannot permit them the luxury of time. He must threaten them with the revolution of their own people, who today dominate the real Islamic street.” (9)

The back drop for this diatribe against the Bush administration is what one commentator calls the “tilting” of the balance of power in the administration toward the realists. (10) A sign of this evolving posture was the disclosure in November by Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, that he has

been authorized to begin discussions with Iran on Iraq stabilization, which would mark the first time the two countries have had direct talks since mid-2003. The potential talks, which seem driven in part by the growing realization by the White House that its strategy in Iraq is failing both there and at home, represent for Ledeen “the policy of preemptive embrace of our announced enemies.”

Neoconservative efforts to combat this apparent realist tilt include more than writing broadsides. On Syria, Perle has been hosting meetings between folks like Ahmed Chalabi and Syrian exile Farid Ghadry, who heads the Syrian Reform Party. Ghadry told the *Wall Street Journal*, “Ahmed paved the way in Iraq for what we want to do in Syria.” Said Perle: “There’s no reason to think engagement with Syria will bring about any change,” adding that Bashar Assad “has never been weaker, and we should take advantage of that.” (11)

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It remains to be seen whether the neoconservatives still have the heft to impact U.S. decision-making in the region. But one thing seems clear—for the moment, the realists have the upper hand. As Jim Lobe writes: “Washington’s growing reliance on

and support for regional diplomacy marks a serious setback to neoconservatives who, long before the Iraq War, had championed the unilateral imposition of a Pax Americana in the Middle East.” (10)

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