

# “A Great Little Racket”: The Neocon Media Machine

By Eli Clifton | March 20, 2007

With the United States bogged down in an increasingly ugly war in Iraq, tensions rising between Tehran and Washington, and public sentiment—which has turned en masse against deeper U.S. commitment in the Middle East—often seeming a non-factor in White House decisionmaking, it is hard to believe that in the past few months some pundits and politicians have been optimistically predicting a dramatic shift in U.S. foreign policy that could, like a *deus ex machina*, resolve the country’s overseas debacles.

The Iraq Study Group (ISG), co-chaired by inside-the-Beltway heavyweights James Baker and former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN), seemed to represent the “adult supervision” so desperately lacking in the blind idealism—or, as others see it, fervid ideology—behind the Bush administration’s misadventures in the Middle East. While President George W. Bush reportedly called the ISG report a “flaming turd,” some observers have held on to the hope that at the very least one cornerstone of the current political scene, the neoconservatives, at long last are being pushed out the door, and along with them their radical ideas about reshaping the Middle East. “Like Mr. Bush, [the neoconservatives] look to the long span of history for vindication. It will indeed be eons before anyone trusts them again,” wrote *Financial Times* columnist Jacob Weisberg in March 2007, after recounting his disappointment at the lack of contrition or regret expressed by neoconservatives for the bungled war in Iraq.

Although many of the core Bush neocons, including Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, have been pushed out of the administration, and recent weeks have witnessed the emergence of a more conciliatory posture toward America’s “enemies” that is the antithesis of neoconservative policy proposals, neoconservatism remains a force to contend with. This fact is highlighted by the influence of American Enterprise Institute (AEI) ideologues in shaping the “surge” plan announced by the president in early January (see, for example, Jim Lobe and Michael Flynn, “The Push Behind the Surge,” *Right Web*, January 11, 2007).

So how do they do it?

One partial answer to this puzzle is the continued strength of neoconservatism and its standard-bearers in the nation’s media, a point made recently by Gideon Rachman in the *Financial Times*. Wrote Rachman: “The neocons stand accused of many errors: imperialism, Leninism, Trotskyism (New York school), militarism. Some believe that the real problem is that so many of them are Jewish—this is an alarmingly popular theme, to judge by my e-mails. But the problem with the neocons is not that so many of them are Jews. The problem is that so many of them are journalists.”

Calling neoconservative media pundits “journalists” is a stretch—the fact is, most don’t report, they spin—but Rachman’s point is a good one. From top to bottom, from tabloid TV like FoxNews to powerhouse newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, neoconservatives have extraordinary presence in the nation’s media. And Washington always seems to be listening.

A case in point has been the fate of the ISG. Even before the release of the ISG report the neoconservative media outlets and pundits began a campaign of discrediting the Baker-Hamilton group and describing its policy recommendations as a blueprint for defeat in Iraq and the war on terror.

In a late November *Weekly Standard* editorial, one week before the ISG report was to be released, former Republican House Speaker and AEI fellow Newt Gingrich warned that any proposal to ask Iran and Syria for assistance in stabilizing Iraq was a sign of “defeat” and “appeasement.”

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Three days later, in a *Washington Post* editorial, Iraq War hawk Charles Krauthammer ridiculed the ISG's suggestion that engaging regional actors in the Middle East might help to secure stability in Iraq. He opined: "Perhaps in some long-term future they will want a stable Iraq as a tame client state of the Syria-Iran axis. For now they want chaos. What in God's name will a negotiation with them yield?"

Several days after the release of the ISG report, perhaps even further emboldened by the Bush administration's declaration that it was not prepared to follow the ISG advice to engage with Syria and Iran, Robert Kagan and William Kristol wrote: "The Iraq Study Group, aided by supportive American media, has successfully conveyed the impression to everyone at home and abroad that the United States is about to withdraw from Iraq."

The ISG report was quickly sidelined and in its place the nation was presented with a new plan for "victory," one apparently inspired in part by the AEI and vociferously promoted by the entire neocon media infrastructure. The president announced his surge plan on national television, in front of an audience that, in large part, wanted nothing to do with it. Part of the success of the surge push no doubt lies with the president and his own ideas. But there is little doubt that the neocon promotion machine weighed heavily.

To understand the media network of the neoconservatives, it is helpful to examine the origins of the movement and how the packaging—and repackaging—of neoconservative ideas has evolved over the past several decades.

Irving Kristol, widely regarded as a founder of neoconservatism and a self-described "liberal who was mugged by reality," made his early mark largely in the areas of journalism and publishing in the 1950s and 1960s. But the early intellectualism of his various journals like *Commentary* gave short shrift to things like policy implementation. Rather, under Kristol's stewardship, early neoconservatism tended to the philosophical, debate, and thoughtful—if increasingly ideological—critiques of the trajectory of the nation and its domestic and foreign policies.

Together with the likes of Norman Podhoretz, who took over *Commentary* after Kristol departed, and a host of like-minded "public intellectuals," early neoconservatism was more an intellectual conversation among a small "band of brothers"—as George Weigel once put it—than a Washington political faction. Kristol also founded the

culture journal *Public Interest* in 1965, and in 1985 the foreign affairs journal *National Interest*. Both *Interests* have had overlapping contributors; they were also both bully pulpits for neoconservative heavyweights such as Francis Fukuyama, Richard Pipes, and Krauthammer. The origins of the neoconservatives' stances on Social Security, the "culture wars," Generation X, crime and punishment, and post-Cold War thought can be traced back to articles published in these journals.

Irving Kristol played an important role in creating the space for sharing ideas and ideology crucial to the evolution of the neoconservative vision. His publications were widely read among academic and intellectual sympathizers of the movement; however, their distribution and reach were not comparable to mainstream periodicals.

But even at this early stage in its development, there were signs of what neoconservatism would evolve into by the 1990s. Not long after Podhoretz took over the editorship of *Commentary* in 1960, the style of the magazine turned sharply bellicose, in line with Podhoretz's own evolving left-to-right political trajectory. As Andrew Bacevich writes in his 2005 book *The New American Militarism*: "Podhoretz did much to create and refine the fiercely combative neoconservative style. That style emphasized not balance (viewed as evidence of timidity) or the careful sifting of evidence (suggesting scholasticism) but the ruthless demolition of any point of view inconsistent with the neoconservative version of truth, typically portrayed as self-evident and beyond dispute."

However, it wasn't until the 1995 founding of the *Weekly Standard* by Irving Kristol's son William that a definitive shift in the media presence of neoconservatism truly took hold, and the impact of the political group inside Washington began to shift. Unlike *Commentary* and other early neoconservative journals, the *Weekly Standard*, owned by the News Corporation, the media conglomerate of Rupert Murdoch, was not targeted at intellectual elites. Rather, it was targeted at conservative power brokers. Under the editorship of William Kristol and Fred Barnes, the *Standard* undertook an explicit mission to affect immediate changes in policy and to serve as a reflection of neoconservative policy campaigns on current affairs. The pretense of intellectualism disappeared.

The influence of the *Weekly Standard* runs all the way to the top of the U.S. government. Vice President Dick Cheney's office at one time reportedly received 30 issues per week, apparently in order to remain on top of any policy recommendations advocated by AEI (where Cheney and his wife have both held positions) and the

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Project for the New American Century (PNAC), two neo-conservative groups with close ties to the management of the *Weekly Standard*.

The *Weekly Standard* has served a pivotal role in what could be considered the neoconservative “echo chamber”—a collection of think tanks, media outlets, and advocacy groups that strengthen and repeat neoconservative policies and ideology through constant media exposure and reinforcement within organizations populated by influential policymakers. Only with this system in place have the neoconservatives, a group with no grassroots support base, been successful in influencing U.S. foreign policy as well as public opinion.

A significant component of the neoconservative echo chamber is its use of mainstream media outlets to disseminate ideas. Neither the academic journals nor neoconservative periodicals have the readership and crucial role in public opinion of the mainstream media. Both the editorial pages of major newspapers and the Fox News cable channel have played pivotal roles in selling neoconservative policies to a more mainstream, conservative, and Republican audience. Max Boot at the *Los Angeles Times*, David Brooks at the *New York Times*, Charles Krauthammer and Robert Kagan at the *Washington Post*, and numerous members of the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board, including Irving Kristol since 1972, have served as liaisons between neoconservative writers and mainstream America.

Fox News, launched in 1996 by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, has served as one of the media outlets of choice for Bush administration rhetoric as well as high-profile neoconservatives. For personalities such as Bill Kristol, Fox News has served as a springboard from which to launch himself into mainstream media circles. The outrage and patriotic rhetoric and images employed by Fox News cast neoconservative ideas and policy in consumable and marketable packaging. Never before had the neoconservatives gained such a mainstream audience. The views of the Bush administration, as well as PNAC and various other neoconservative groups, were regularly publicized through Fox News and regional newspaper editorial pages during the lead up to the war in Iraq. The sprinkling of neoconservative writers and pundits throughout the U.S. mainstream media served an invaluable role in pushing for neoconservative-crafted Mideast policy.

The impact and influence of the neoconservative echo chamber was felt when accusations of an Iraqi weapons of mass destruction program and charges that Saddam

Hussein’s regime was harboring al-Qaida members flooded the mainstream media during the buildup to the invasion of Iraq. Despite the factual inaccuracy of nearly all the Bush administration’s justifications for invading Iraq, the media and policy lobbying wings of the neoconservative camp successfully disseminated their message and promoted their vision of a democratized, U.S.-friendly Iraq.

To argue that neoconservative influence is truly on the wane, as Fukuyama and others have claimed, is to ignore the continued impact of this echo chamber. Unlike the early years of the movement, today’s neoconservatives enjoy a serious—and powerful—presence within the mainstream media. Though this level does not generate the political faction’s ideas and policies, it does generate influence. Access to the gates of mainstream media has enabled the movement to actually implement and market its objectives to America.

The attainment of this power owes a great deal to the early neocons who saw value in becoming “gatekeepers” of information and ideas. Starting with Irving Kristol’s early days at *Commentary*, the movement gained a voice, but one largely aimed at intellectual and academic elites. In fact, the evolution of the neocon movement parallels the growth of its founders as publishers and media figures. Later, when Bill Kristol founded the *Weekly Standard*, the neoconservatives could present specific policy objectives to Washington elites.

Not by any accident, the neoconservatives’ time of greatest influence on U.S. foreign policy coincided with the explosive growth of mass media outlets from which they could promote their policies. The omnipresent fluttering American flag on Fox News exemplifies the new über-patriotic packaging through which the invasion of Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, and the escalation of tensions with Iran are marketed packages.

When asked why the *Weekly Standard* and Fox News have increased in popularity over the past few years, Matt Labash, a senior writer at the *Weekly Standard* responded that it was “because they feed the rage. We bring the pain to the liberal media. I say that mockingly, but it’s true somewhat. We come with a strong point of view and people like point of view journalism. While all these hand-wringing Freedom Forum types talk about objectivity, the conservative media likes to rap the liberal media on the knuckles for not being objective. We’ve created this cottage industry in which it pays to be un-objective. It pays to be subjective as much as possible. It’s a great way to have your cake and eat it too. Criticize other

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people for not being objective. Be as subjective as you want. It's a great little racket. I'm glad we found it actually."

If Irving Kristol intended to start a revolution with his writing on the culture wars and U.S. Cold-War foreign policy, he certainly laid the groundwork in academic journals and periodicals. What may never have entered his imagination at the time was the degree of success the second generation of neoconservatives would experience in marketing neoconservative ideas to a mainstream audience. The original network of journals and think tanks has been amplified by a powerful, streamlined media machine. The neoconservative revolution has, quite literally, been televised.

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