Neoconservatism

This is the third in a series of articles in the International Relations 101 section about "understanding international relations and foreign policy decision making." These articles seek to make this complex, multi-dimensional arena accessible to people outside the halls of power. The series also pulls duty as a necessary backdrop for understanding the wisdom-based alternative approaches to the field that are being developed by The Wisdom Project.

Neoconservatism: Dead in the Water?

by Charles Strohmer

With the inauguration of George W. Bush as President of the United States in January 2001, neoconservatism moved from think tanks, journals, and the classroom into the policy decision-making process of the White House, as Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld appointed numerous neoconservative thinkers to high-level positions of influence in the administration (see IR & Theory article). These appointments to the highest levels of government included, at the White House, I. Lewis ?Scooter' Libby as Chief of Staff to the Vice-President, and at the Pentagon, Paul Wolfowitz as Deputy Secretary of Defense, Richard Perle as Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Douglas Feith as Undersecretary of Defense for Policy. As a result, neoconservatism become a household word across America, Europe, and the Middle East.

To many people, the political philosophy seemed to have arrived from nowhere. Not so. Francis Fukuyama and others trace its origins to ?a remarkable group of largely Jewish intellectuals who attended City College of New York (CCNY) in the mid- to late-1930s and early 1940s, a group that included Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Irving Howe, Seymour Martin Lipset, Philip Selznick, Nathan Glazer, and, a bit later, Daniel Patrick Moynihan.? The two most important ideas around which most of these liberal intellectuals coalesced, writes Fukuyama, was an intense anticommunism and opposition to utopian social engineering. (Fukuyama, America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy, 2006, p. 15.)

No fans of flower power

During the 1960s, this loose-knit group of liberal politicians, social scientists, and intellectuals in the Democrat party began reacting critically to what they had concluded were a number of wrong-headed approaches to the most pressing issues of the decade. They were, for one thing, rattled as many others were by the decade's social upheavals, fearing that America was becoming ungovernable. Although they were sympathetic to domestic social reform and racial justice and to tackling poverty ? all of which became towering issues in the 1960s ? they reproached President Lyndon Johnson (a Democrat) for the expansive government policies behind his Great Society program, which arose in 1964?1965 to deal with such issues. One of leading figures of the group, Irving Kristol, believed ?that poverty could be overcome,? but not by government gigantism, ?only by gradual economic growth that brought with it greater economic opportunities for outsiders.? (Murray Friedman, The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy, 2005, p. 116.)during the 1960s, the group's emerging political philosophy began to wend its way into the bloodstream of U.S. domestic and foreign policy thinking and the word ?neoconservatism? began to be used

It was during the 1960s, the group's emerging political philosophy began to wend its way into the bloodstream of U.S. domestic and foreign policy thinking and the word ?neoconservatism? began to be used invidiously by opponents to describe the group. In 1965, Kristol, with help from Daniel Bell, founded the journal The Public Interest, which addressed questions about Democrat policy, such as urban renewal, law and order, education, and racial justice. ?Led by Podhoretz and Kristol,? writes historian John Ehrman, ?the neoconservatives used the pages of Commentary and Public Interest to warn against the dangers of radicalism at home and Soviet expansionism abroad.? (Ehrman, The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs 1945-1994 1995, p. 34.) To Kristol is attributed the saying: ?A neoconservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality.?

Strongly anti-communist in their foreign policy, the group criticized what they perceived was the too-soft approach of the radical left to the Soviet threat, and they favored an aggressive agenda to Soviet expansion that included the promotion of American ideals, democracy, and free market economics overseas. Their approach to diplomacy was more hard-nosed than what either realists or

idealists practiced, and their proclivity to see Soviet expansionism rolled back via military intervention was well-known in Washington, and considered by many as a very bad alternative to containment policy, which many Democrats and Republicans adhered to. Their foreign policy made them even more unpopular with the political left, although they argued that international organizations, treaties, international law, and the UN should not become a hindrance if in certain cases the United States sought to spread democracy in the world unilaterally. And they were serious supporters of Israel.

The 1970s and 1980s

Neoconservatives were no fans of President Carter's human rights foreign policy, and by 1980, as the Carter-Reagan presidential election loomed, they had become convinced that they would never become lieutenants of power in the Democrat Party. During the Carter-Reagan campaign, many neoconservatives transferred ?their hopes to Ronald Reagan and the Republicans, expecting that a conservative victory would bring them all the opportunities and rewards they had been denied by the Democrats.? (Ibid., p. 136.) After Reagan won the presidency, he did bring in the neoconservative intellectual Jeane Kirkpatrick as a foreign policy advisor, and later named her U.S. ambassador to the UN. This gave neoconservatives high access to the Reagan administration, but Reagan never bought into their political philosophy extensively, and he lost a lot of support from neoconservatives when he pulled the U.S. military out of Lebanon (February, 1984).

With the perestroika and glasnost policies of Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-1991), the fall of the Berlin Wall (end of 1989), and the formal dissolution of the USSR (December 1991), neoconservatism lost the enemy over against which it had defined itself. And gone with it was whatever appeal it may been accumulating as a guide for Washington's foreign policy. (Ibid., p. 176.) Although the political philosophy was further eclipsed with the election of Bill Clinton to the White House in 1992 (Clinton was a liberal internationalist Democrat with little time for ?the neocons?), the neoconservatives, though small in numbers compared to realist and idealist networks, are resourceful and well-funded, and they plied their time.

Clinton and the neoconservatives

Garaged during Clinton's two terms in office, neoconservatives re-engineered their basic political philosophy in a language and with policy proposals suited to what now occupied everyone's mind in Washington: America's changing role in the world, now that the world was no longer divided into two opposing superpower camps. Neoconservative thinkers during this period rolled out their views through the prestigious American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy (AEI), a conservative think tank that allows for other views, and National Interest, a foreign affairs journal founded in 1985 by Irving Kristol.before the 2000 presidential election, neoconservative intellectuals ?had proposed a foreign policy agenda involving concepts like regime change, benevolent hegemony, uni-polarity, preemption, and American exceptionalism.?

Both venues gave outlets to a new generation of keen neoconservative intellects, including Elliot Abrahams, William Kristol (son of Irving), Robert Kagan, and the nationally syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer. Another outlet, The Weekly Standard, was founded in 1995 by William Kristol, and in 1997 a number of influential neoconservatives, led by William Kristol and Robert Kagan, founded the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), which promoted an aggressive U.S. foreign policy that they called neo-Reaganite.

Fukuyama writes that in their years out of power before the 2000 presidential election, neoconservative intellectuals ?had proposed a foreign policy agenda involving concepts like regime change, benevolent hegemony, uni-polarity, preemption, and American exceptionalism.? (Fukuyama, Crossroads, p. 3.)

Promoting regime change in Iraq

Perhaps their boldest move from the garage during President Clinton's tenure was when they rolled out their January 26, 1998 PNAC letter to the president that called for regime change in Iraq. Presented to Clinton, the letter argued that ?the aim of American foreign policy? should be ?removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power.? ?We urge you to articulate this aim,? the letter concluded. ?We stand ready to offer our full support in this difficult but necessary endeavor.? It was signed by Elliot Abrams, John Bolton, Francis Fukuyama, Robert Kagan, William Kristol, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and eleven other key political allies.

The Clinton White House did not act on it. Or did it? We may never know. As Al Gore once told Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward, the public only knows one percent of what goes on at the White House (The Charlie Rose Show, PBS-TV, July 16, 2009). Certainly Clinton did not remove Saddam Hussein from power. But these things take time. What we do know is that in

September 1998, nine months after Clinton received the letter, a bill was introduced to both the House and the Senate under the cumbersome title: ?To establish a program to support a transition to democracy in Iraq.? It sailed through Congress and was signed into law by President Clinton on October 31 as ?The Iraq Liberation Act.? Although conventional wisdom lays the decision to change the regime in Iraq squarely at the feet of President George W. Bush, whose U.S.-led military effort did remove Saddam Hussein from power in early 2003, the policy had in fact become official U.S. policy under Clinton, who, with Congressional sanction, got the ball rolling.

But, as an aside, it is much more cloudy than that. Americans like to ignore that it is the CIA that has been tasked with engineering regime changes since the early years of its founding. The organization is tops in the field. (A wealth of information on this covert area of the institution's activities is increasingly in the public record on the official National Security Archives website of Georgetown University.) That, and the Halloween, Iraq Liberation Act, gives us an entirely different take on the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which began March 20, 2003. A widely disseminated and believed conventional wisdom has arisen to show that the CIA during this turning point period in American history was in disarray, acting with anything but intelligence, the indisputable ?proof? being seen by everyone, in the much discussed ?facts? of a CIA that had stupidly botched the intelligence about Iraq's WMD. But did it? Certainly our imaginations ought to at least allow for the possibility that the CIA had finally found a time, a way, and a White House through which to fulfill what it had been tasked by Congress to do four-and-a-half -years earlier? If scaring the heck out of Americans about Iraq's WMD program was the way to do it, what was that to an organization trained to deceive?

In the councils of power

You don't hear neoconservatives complaining. In fact, they were in a rare position on September 11, 2001. Not only were they geared for war with Iraq, they held positions of the highest level of influence in the Bush White House. And now, voilà, a replacement enemy had materialized over against which to justify their militant foreign policy. ?In an instant,? writes professor of international relations Andrew Bacevich, ?the world was once again divided into two opposing and irreconcilable camps.? And it was ?the world's fight,? President Bush told Congress and the nation on September 20. ?Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists,? Bush warned. (Bacevich, American Empire: The Reality and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy, 2002, p. 225-226.)

The president's words resonated with the neoconservatives, who, just days after the attack, and now firing on all cylinders, successfully lobbied the president to elevate the threat posed by Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network into a clear and present danger from Saddam Hussein. In fact, the option to invade Iraq instead of going after al Qaeda in Afghanistan was debated in the White House immediately after the attacks on 9/11.between September 12-15, Wolfowitz and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld suggested striking Iraq

According to acclaimed investigative journalist Bob Woodward, ?the pentagon had been working for months on developing a military option for Iraq,? and Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense, was committed to a policy that ?would make Iraq a principal target of the first round in the war on terrorism.? During the highest-level discussions at the White House and Camp David between September 12-15, Wolfowitz and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld suggested striking Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell voiced his opposition, and President Bush nixed the idea for the time being, saying that the American people ?want us to do something about al Qaeda? in Afghanistan. (Woodward, Bush at War, 2002, p. 49. See also: Thomas Ricks, Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006), pp. 30-32. See also: "The Downing Street Memo," written by Matthew Rycroft, a Downing Street foreign policy aide, dated 23 July, 2002. Released to The Sunday Times on May 12, 2005, the memo notes that, at a Prime Minister's meeting about Iraq on July 23, 2002, there had been ?a perceptible shift in attitude? in Washington. ?Military action was now seen as inevitable.... It seemed clear that Bush had made up his mind to take military action, even if the time was not yet decided.?)

By the time the Taliban and al Qaeda had been driven from power in Afghanistan ? the primary agency for that stunningly quick success being the CIA ? there was widespread acceptance across the political spectrum in Washington and America for removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq ? the primary reason being the continual circulation of CIA intelligence ?proving? a threat to the United States from Iraq's dangerous stockpiling of WMD ? and President Bush found it easy sailing to get Congress to sign off on the invasion.

Washington's reliance on neoconservative political philosophy for its Middle East policy during the first term of the Bush presidency can also be attributed, I believe, to the weakened appeal of realism and idealism by then. Simply put, there was no other foreign

policy ideology that could gainsay neoconservative policy for the Middle East. The two perennial -isms were still being questioned for being unable to predict the epochal event known as the collapse of the Soviet Union, and neither had been able either to wow the popular imagination or to unify the foreign policy community around a post?Cold War strategy for the United States.

Further, there was no expecting the new President Bush to be able to mount credible arguments against the well-thought-out views of his Vice-President and Secretary of Defense and in favor of another policy. Together, Cheney and Rumsfeld had fifty-plus years of experience in Washington, many of those years spent serving in former presidents in high-level advisory posts, and they now listened to the neoconservative advisors they had appointed.

Quite unlike his father, George W. Bush had very little foreign policy experience before entering the White House. During his campaign in 2000 for president, Bush asked Richard Armitage, Colin Powell's best friend, to join his team of foreign policy advisors. Although Armitage accepted, he later told Bob Woodward, for State of Denial, that Bush had a dreadful lack of experience. ?The big problem, Armitage thought, was that he was not sure Bush filled the suit required of a president.... Armitage told his wife and Powell that he was not sure Governor Bush understood the implications of the United States as world power.? (Woodward, State of Denial: Bush at War, 2006, p. 9.)

Out of the councils of power

But neoconservatism's popularity waned again. After the immediate success of Saddam Hussein's removal turned into the counter-narrative of a worst-of-all-worlds situation, neoconservatives began to demur when critics implicated them in the incompetent planning for postwar contingencies. (See, e.g., James Fallows, Blind into Baghdad: America's War in Iraq, 2006), cpt. 2.) But coolness toward neoconservatism among Washington's political elite set in as the horrific violence in Iraq increased. Right after the November 2006 midterm elections, President Bush, now in his second term, accepted Donald Rumsfeld's resignation and began removing neoconservative advisors from the administration, replacing them with those who could be trusted to shift U.S. Middle East policy in a more realist direction. The appointment of Roberts Gates as Secretary of Defense was the most prominent move in that direction.President Bush, now in his second term, accepted Donald Rumsfeld's resignation and began removing neoconservative advisors from the administration

In 2006, PNAC was shut down, and by 2008 most the administration's neoconservative advisors were out of government. Many had moved beyond demurring to what critics now called a rewriting of the role they had played in the Bush White House, to salvage what they could of their political philosophy. In response, the neoconservatives claimed they were merely getting the truth out, setting the record straight. Typically, they identified the State Department, the CIA, or many realists and idealists as having exaggerated the role of neoconservatism in the Bush White House in order to use neoconservatism (in the press and the media) as a scapegoat for the disastrously mismanaged years in Iraq following the ouster of Saddam Hussein. (See, e.g., Douglas Feith, War and Decision; Richard Perle, ?Ambushed on the Potomac,? The National Interest Online, Jan. 21, 2009; Nathan Guttman, ?No Longer in Power, Free to Talk, Neocons Seek to Rewrite History,? Forward.com, Dec. 24, 2008.)

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that neoconservatism crashed and burned. When running for the presidency against Barack Obama in 2008, Senator John McCain included leading neoconservatives on his team of foreign policy and national security advisors, though he also received ad hoc advice from realists Henry Kissinger and Richard Armitage. Krauthammer and William Kristol are still going strong, though you will not see the bylines of either in Time anymore. The Weekly Standard, National Interest, AEI, the Hudson Institute, and other well-established avenues remain available for test driving neoconservative ideas for U.S. policy in the Middle East. And neoconservatives support bombing Iran's nuclear facilities, an option that President Obama has not as yet taken off the table.

The conceptual core of neoconservatism

Historically, neoconservatism as a political ideology has included adherents whose views are complex and diverse, and that has become more so as key figures rethink the ideology in light of the Iraq war, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, and the knotty problem of Iran's nuclear program. Yet despite the conceptual flux, Fukuyama has summarized what he calls the ?four common principles or threads? that ran through neoconservative thought up through the end of the Cold War: ?a concern with democracy, human rights, and more generally the internal politics of states; a belief that U.S. power can be used for moral purposes; a skepticism about the ability of international law and institutions to solve serious security problems; and finally, a view that ambitious social engineering often leads to unexpected consequences and often undermines its own ends.? (Fukuyama, Crossroads, pp. 4-5.)

There is a whiff of realist and idealist interests in this. Idealism is enthusiastic about democracy promotion, human rights initiatives, and it focuses more on a state's internal politics than realism assumes is necessary. Realism is skeptical about international law and institutions. And both emphasize, in their own ways, moral use of power. It is not enough, however, merely to acknowledge outer similarities of the three political -isms. At issue is the way in which neoconservatives think about the ideas, for that determines the creation and direction of their policies.

It should be noted that, although neoconservative ideas lit the Bush administration's Middle East policy universe, it cannot be concluded from this that President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, or Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld were neoconservatives in principle. None ever accepted the label, and it seems unlikely that any of them will ever claim it. What can be concluded is that all three, especially Cheney and Rumsfeld, had strong neoconservative leanings and that all three abetted neoconservative foreign policy ideas for the Middle East after 9/11, at the expense of realist and idealist approaches.

This is understood from the so-called Bush Doctrine, which both supporters and critics have cobbled together from recurring points in a number of Bush administration speeches, documents, and policy statements, most prominently the president's State of the Union address in January 2002, his speeches at West Point and the American Enterprise Institute (June 2002 and February 2003), and the administration's controversial National Security Strategy of the United States, or NSS (released September 2002). ?These official pronouncements,? writes Fukuyama, ?are consistent with what neoconservatives outside the administration were arguing; indeed, in the case of Bush's second inaugural, some outsiders provided ideas directly. Given this record, it is not surprising that many observers saw the Bush administration as being decisively shaped by neoconservatives.? (Ibid., p. 3.)
Their future council?
With the conceptual unrest now faced by neoconservatives and the cooled reception of their ideas in Washington, it is hard to say what the future holds for them. We may see the emergence of a third generation of neoconservatives as well as offshoot of the ideology, as neorealism and neoliberalism emerged from perceived inadequacies of their ideological roots.

In early-2009, Robert Kagan, William Kristol, and others launched the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI), which, according to its website, promotes: a continued U.S. diplomatic, economic, and military engagement in the world; robust support for America's democratic allies and opposition to rogue regimes that threaten American interests; the human rights of those oppressed by their governments; U.S. leadership in spreading political and economic freedom; a strong military ready to confront the threats of the twenty-first century; and international economic engagement as a key element of U.S. foreign policy.

Neoconservatism is a political ideology that owes a good deal of its existence to capitalizing on large pieces of the international relations puzzle that realists and idealists emphasize, such as the state, balance of power, and national interests. But neoconservatives bring a much different understanding of these pieces to their analyses and policy prescriptions than do realists and idealists, and therefore a much different motivation. (This may go some way in explaining why neoconservatives at times prefer to be known as democratic globalists or American internationalists.)
Diplomacy: my way or the highway?
Some indication of what their future council might hold may be found in the neoconservative diplomatic attitude toward Iran. Please keep in mind, however, that this is just short, broad-brush stroke article, so I don't want anyone to stereotype the following because I offer only the one illustration of it, and a Reader's Digest version at that, but it was hugely disturbing at the time, and I find the incident, which has never been given the public attention it deserves, very revealing. And as historical moments mean everything, let's begin there.

Between October 7, 2001 and December 7, a surprisingly small force of CIA-led U.S. and British Special Forces, U.S. Marines, and soldiers of the Northern Alliance had driven al Qaeda, the Taliban, and its leader Mullah Omar from power in Afghanistan, and the UN-led Bonn Conference had set up the Afghan Interim Authority to start the political process for forming a new national government.

Flash forward to March 20, 2003. U.S. air strikes begin over Baghdad and soon 248,000 U.S. troops, with 48,000 coalition troops, invade Iraq and within six weeks have toppled Saddam Hussein's regime. On May 1, President Bush lands on the deck of the USS

Abraham Lincoln to announce ?the end of major combat operations? in the Iraq war.

Highly impressed, evidently, at these two swift, major military successes, and perhaps a little nervous that it might be the next domino to fall, the Iranian government approached Washington, through the Swiss embassy, with a formal request to open up negotiations. Here was a regime that had had no embassy-level diplomatic relations with the United States since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution suddenly reaching out to negotiate with the George W. Bush administration, big time. The major issues the regime laid on the table are today unimaginable, yet they are the one most desired today by Washington.the Iranian government approached Washington, through the Swiss embassy, with a formal request to open up negotiations.

What was in the Iranian offer? In Chapter 19 of his book Treacherous Alliance, Trita Parsi, an adjunct professor at John Hopkins University SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies) and president of the National Iranian American Council, writes that the Iranians had prepared a comprehensive proposal. And most significantly, it was authoritative. According to Parsi, the proposal was drafted and known only to a closed circle of decision-makers in Tehran, and it had been approved by the highest levels of clerical and political authorities, including Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, the supreme leader, who has the final say in all matters of state. Apart from Khamanei's imprimatur, the proposal would not be taken seriously by the Bush White House.

In an Appendix to the book, Parsi includes a copy of the formal proposal, in which the Iranians called for a dialogue of ?mutual respect? and listed major ?points of contention? that Iran was willing to discuss with the U.S. The Americans, Parsi writes, were stunned by the proposal. Iran had declared itself willing to talk about: its nuclear program; help in stabilizing Iraq; increasing its cooperation with the U.S. on al Qaeda (Iran had assisted the U.S.in ousting the Taliban and al Qaeda from Afghanistan); ending Iranian ?material support to Palestinian opposition groups? (Hamas, Islamic Jihad, et al.) and pressuring ?these organizations to stop violent action against civilians?; leaning on Hezbollah ?to become a mere political organization within Lebanon,? and accepting the Arab League's Beirut Declaration for a two-state solution.

The proposal, of course, also spelled out what Iran would like to see on the table in return from the U.S., including: the removal of Iran from the ?axis of evil,? an end of sanctions and impediments to international trade, ?full access to peaceful nuclear technology,? recognition of ?Iran's legitimate security interests in the region,? and U.S. help against anti-Iranian terrorists. The proposal closed by suggesting mutual next steps, including public statements, the establishment of parallel working groups, and hammering out a timetable for implementation. It was unprecedented. And it was rejected.

After its stunning successes in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush White House by the spring of 2003 found itself breathing the diplomatic air most envied (and unobtainable) by world capitals: extraordinary heights of negotiating power with capitals of the Muslim Middle East. Tehran had taken a huge risk in reaching out. It now hoped, and awaited a response. It got none. Instead, the Swiss Embassy got a slap on the wrist for daring to interfere.

It was a blown historical moment. Not only would the U.S. be able to enter the talks that could start defusing these long-standing bilateral adversarial relations, it would do so in a position with huge diplomatic strength. Further, the regional situation hadn't looked so hopeful for decades. There was no perfect storm in Iraq. The initial military success had not yet given way to the al Qaeda insurgency or the brutal sectarian violence between the Sunnis and the Shiites in Iraq. The radical Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was still mayor of Tehran and not president of Iran. The regime's hardline ruling clerics had not yet disqualified 2,000 moderate and reformed-minded political candidates from running in Iran's 2004 parliamentary elections. The so-called border in southern Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah had not occurred. The world's cliff-hanging worries over Iran's nuclear aims were still distant. The Shiite militias in Iraq were not yet being re-supplied by Iranian sources. And so on.

As with all diplomatic proposals, of course, this one was but a starting point, the beginning of the international game of getting to Yes. The proposal, as both sides knew, was not set in stone. Many issues in it would hit the cutting room floor on the way to an agreement, if ever there were an agreement, but now it was the recipient's move.? Finally it was all paying off,? write journalists Lou Dubose and Bernstein. ?One of the countries that Bush had placed in the Axis of Evil was coming out of the cold.? (Dubose and Bernstein, Vice: Dick Cheney and the Hijacking of the American Presidency, 2006, p. 186.)

It would be an exceptional move indeed if at this point in this particular case the recipient did not engage with the sender, perhaps by paring down or eliminating two or three issues in a letter of response while emphasizing one or two others it was willing to start talks about. The other party would then reply to such modifications, and so on. If the parties kept at it, they may forge solid linkages one or two issues, and if an appropriate framework were found whereby the parties could sit down to work on a mutually beneficial agreement surrounding those issues, then formal talks could begin. Further, it would not be unusual if the issues that made it through to Yes became, over time, ground for increased trust between the parties eventually leading to talks about remaining issues. And this was sorely need between these two parties.The Bush administration, however, refused to reciprocate. The Iranian proposal was not even tested.

In fact, the Iranian proposal seems to have been sent in such a spirit. These words are tucked into the middle of it: ?We have always been ready for direct and authoritative talks with the US/with Iran in good faith and with the aim of discussing ? in mutual respect ? our common interests and our mutual concerns based on merits and objective realities....? (Parsi, Alliance, Appendix.) The Bush administration, however, refused to reciprocate. The Iranian proposal was not even tested. ?An opportunity for a major breakthrough had been willfully wasted,? Parsi concluded. (Parsi, Alliance, p.249). Larry Wilkerson, Secretary of State Powell's chief of staff at the time, believes the mistake was huge. According to BBC News security correspondent Gordon Corera, Wilkerson afterward said, ?In my mind, it was one of those things? about which you say ?I can't believe we did this,? especially at a time when Iranian vulnerability was at its greatest and Washington at its most triumphalist.

It would be understatement in the extreme to call this a missed opportunity. Parsi writes that American nonresponse was perceived in Tehran as an insult, noting that Iran began ?complaining about the difficulty of dealing with an ideological? White House. ?Washington's handling of the Iranian proposal,? Parsi concludes, ?strengthened Iran's belief that dealing with the United States from a position of weakness would not work.? (Ibid., pp. 255, 256.)

The radical Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was not yet president of Iran, Iran's tactical help in Afghanistan had been paying off, the Powell State Department had been pushing for a strategic opening with Iran, and the moderates were still strong and wanted to deal. According to diplomatic correspondent Barbara Slavin in Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies, Colin Powell, Richard Armitage (Powell's deputy), and Larry Wilkerson had been trying to build a proactive policy toward Iran, but they faced continual ?ferocious opposition? from Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz (Deputy Secretary of Defense). (Slavin, Bitter Friends, 2007, p.196.)

Parsi writes (p. 248) that Powell, Armitage, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice went to the President with the Iranian proposal, ?but instead of instigating a lively debate of the details of the American response, Cheney and Rumsfeld quickly put the matter to an end.? They argued in favor of not responding. The President agreed. So ?we told them no,? Wilkerson said in an interview at George Washington University, and ?we wrote a letter of protest to the Swiss for interfering in our foreign policy? (Dubose and Bernstein, Vice, p. 186.) The steely neoconservative mindset in the Bush administration toward U.S. adversaries prevailed: why talk when you can demand?

President Bush's Vice-President and Secretary of Defense reveal an a collective attitude that can prevail at the highest levels of a national government, and at great a cost, for in the ensuing years of Iranian ultra-hardline foreign policy, the regime has become an even more unreachable adversary of the United States. With the exception of Israel, neoconservative diplomacy is very hard-lined toward most Middle East states, in that it seems quite happy at times, such as with Iran, to set unrealistic preconditions that must be met before any talks with the U.S. may occur.

A neoconservative response to entering high-level talks with Iran might be to say that such talks are not in the interests of the U.S. But just the opposite can be equally argued. When at the highest levels of U.S. government an entrenched attitude exists that precludes talking to Iran, how does that serve U.S. national interests, especially when the security and prosperity to the Middle East are important to those interests? It seems wise to open up direct talks with Iran, Syria too, without setting preconditions for such talks. The history is that was after Cheney-Rumsfeld snub of Iran, after there was no hope of reciprocation from Washington, that Tehran's relations with Washington seriously worsened.

As neoconservative policy sought to tighten the noose, the Iranian regime fought back. Ultra-hardline clerics gained power over the

moderates, reformed-minded political candidates were quashed, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president, Hezbollah was green-lighted to incite Israel, the nuclear program was refueled, and so on. This is not to suggest cause and effect. Not in the least. It is only to suggest what might have been the wisdom in talking to an adversary who seemed willing to hold high-level talks. For it is not with one's friends and allies that one needs to make peace; and one cannot make peace with an adversary without talking.

Militarism, the hallmark

Although not even neoconservatives themselves can predict what their future council might hold, I believe it is militarism that remains key to understanding the driving force of its conceptual picture, and that may proved clues to future policy proposal. Neoconservatives seem never to have lost their original militarism from the 1960s, as is implied, clearly implied, in FPI's Mission Statement, which can be read on the Web. Once aimed at Soviet expansionism, but held in check for decades by containment prudence, and for all the problems that followed the invasion of Iraq, neoconservative militarism is today leading the charge, quite unembarrassedly leading, to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities.

Neoconservatives ? and this is their legacy to date ? are implicated in placing the United States on a war footing in the Middle East from which the nation will not easily free itself, as the Obama administration has discovered. Although political realism emerged to inform U.S. Middle East policy in the closing years of Bush's tenure, and though President Obama favors a liberal internationalist agenda influenced by multilateral realism, the formidable internal logic of neoconservative militarism remains influential in Washington's Middle East policy. Because of this, the world remains never more than one international incident between Iran and America away from seeing it triggered, again.

Comment on the topic here