

The End of the Neo-Cons

With the ill advised Iraq invasion now an error-ridden quagmire the Bush regime's version of American exceptionalism is sinking fast. Not even Republican hawks want to have much to do with it anymore, writes **David Olive**

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"Every dogma has its day."
— Abraham Rotstein

"America! America! God mend thine ev'ry flaw;
Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law! (italics added)
— Katharine Lee Bates, "America The Beautiful" (1893)

Whether or not the Republicans lose control of one or both houses of the U.S. Congress on Tuesday, the neo-conservative vision that has guided American foreign policy since 2001 has run its course. The neo-cons' grand design lies in ruins, having accomplished nothing other than to shrink America's stature in the world.

The great unwinding of the American "benign global hegemony" first heralded by neo-cons William Kristol and Robert Kagan in 1996 will commence after the election, when America's political leadership will abandon Iraq and the neo-cons.

The neo-cons' starting point, of course, was the Americanization of Iraq — the "easy win" that would trigger rogue states from the Middle East to the Korean peninsula to fall in line with American values of capitalism, democracy and pro-Israel policies.

But the Iraq conflict has proved unwinnable. And as handmaidens to a \$300-billion (U.S.) catastrophe in Iraq that has cost the lives of at least 400,000 Iraqis and almost 3,000 American soldiers, and which ranks as the worst American foreign-policy disaster since Vietnam, the neo-cons have irretrievably lost their credibility.

By Christmas or soon thereafter, a White House that has run out of options on Iraq will begin to cut and run, pronouncing favourably on an exit plan that is now in the final stages of completion by a team led by James Baker, former U.S. secretary of state and a close friend of the Bush family, and Lee Hamilton, a respected former congressman and Democrat who co-chaired the 9/11 Commission.

Having already scrapped his Iraq mantra of "stay the course" late last month, U.S. President George W. Bush will adopt the most substantive points of the Baker-Hamilton blueprint for extricating America from the Iraq quagmire with as much dignity as

possible. Baker, despised by the neo-cons for his nuanced, diplomatic approach to geopolitics, has already indicated that the options under consideration by his team are all variations of withdrawal. The only questions are how rapidly the Americans will leave, and which honeyed words the Bush administration will use in trying to dress up failure as success.

Withdrawal from Iraq can't come a moment too soon for a Republican Party paying a heavy price for allowing itself to be hijacked by one of the most naïve world views to come down the pike since Henry Ford chartered a shipload of peace activists and set sail for Europe in 1915. There isn't a Republican drawing breath, war hawk John McCain included, who wants to campaign in 2008 on a diplomatic and military horror show produced and directed by a Republican White House and a GOP-controlled Congress.

How long it takes for the neo-cons' influence to shrivel up completely is a matter of speculation, of course. Their clubhouse, the American Enterprise Institute, isn't in trouble with its landlord yet. William Kristol, son of neo-con godhead Irving Kristol and "Dan Quayle's brain" as chief-of-staff to the former vice-president, remains editor of Rupert Murdoch's Weekly Standard, the club's newsletter, and a ubiquitous talking head despite his role as the galvanizing force of a bankrupt theology.

And barring regime change at The Wall Street Journal, space will continue to be found on its extremist editorial pages for the hectoring of neo-cons Paul Wolfowitz, David Frum, Richard Perle, Doug Feith, Max Boot, Charles Krauthammer, Elliott Abrams, Ken Adelman, James Woolsey, Michael Ledeen, Christopher Hitchens and neo-con-sympathizers Michael Ignatieff, Naill Ferguson and Margaret MacMillan.

But the neo-cons got a taste of things to come when Kristol appeared on a National Public Radio panel in late July with Gen. William Odom (ret.). Kristol, the first and probably last magazine editor to help spearhead American foreign policy, was arguing for a hard line against Hezbollah in the midst of another U.S. foreign-policy debacle, the civilian deaths and \$3.6-billion (U.S.) worth of property damage the Israeli Defence Forces managed to inflict on Lebanon with White House encouragement. When it was his turn to speak, Odom was beside himself:

"Mr. Kristol certainly wants to make (Lebanon) our war," Odom said. "He's the man with remarkable moral clarity. He tends to forget the clarity he had on getting us into the mess in Mesopotamia. I think if you look at his record, you'd wonder why anybody would allow him to speak publicly anymore."

Among Republicans, the knives are out for their former neo-conservative comrades in arms, including Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. secretary who was one of the original signatories, in 1997, of the neo-cons' founding playbook, Kristol's Project for the New American Century, along with fellow travellers Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, Lewis Libby, and a dozen or so other future members of the Bush II administration. There's no novelty in the recent calls for the removal of Rumsfeld, described recently by The Economist as "responsible for having needlessly alienated more former friends of the United States

than any other instrument since the invention of the B-52 bomber." Nothing new except that Republican candidates have joined the dump-Rumsfeld chorus, and party regulars seldom embarrass their leader in the midst of an election campaign by openly questioning the composition of his cabinet. That's how desperate Republicans are for at least the impression of change.

Rumsfeld, erstwhile chief salesman for the artificial sweetener Aspartame, holds one geopolitical idea, and one that is wrong — that wars can be won with technological wizardry alone. Hence Rumsfeld's under-deployment of troops that doomed the neo-cons' Iraq reinvention mission from the start. About which Rumsfeld is witheringly unapologetic. That's a trait shared with most of Rummy's fellow neo-cons, and which once came off as admirably principled conviction. It now strikes the 60 per cent of American poll respondents who disagree with the conduct of the war in Iraq as rank stupidity.

"The principal sin of the neo-conservatives is overbearing arrogance," says David Keene, chairman of the American Conservative Union. Like his counterparts at the Cato Institute, the Club for Growth, and other conservative think tanks preoccupied with tax cuts and fiscal probity, Keene is unhappy that his agenda has been turned on its head since 2001 by a fiscally ruinous neo-con revival of an old idea — that of American foreign-policy "exceptionalism."

Under the influence of neo-cons like Cheney, who has privately said that deficits don't matter, America has endured six years of runaway spending by a GOP-controlled Congress and a near-doubling in the congressionally approved debt ceiling since Bill Clinton left office, to \$9 trillion (U.S.).

Of the ongoing disaster in Iraq, neo-con agitator David Frum gamely argued recently that, "The war has to be seen through the prism of Hurricane Katrina," alluding to the incompetence that earned Bush the distinction of being the first president to lose a great American city through sheer passivity. "Conservatives will support a tough war if they are confident in the war's management."

Frum echoes Michael Ignatieff, who, like many liberal hawks on Iraq in 2002-03, has since taken refuge in the proposition that no one could have foreseen that "the Americans in Iraq would make every mistake possible." Could not, that is, have foreseen that an Iraq occupation might be botched by a nation with the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam and the Iran-Contra scandal on its record; that by choice lacks the peacekeeping and other skills associated with successful occupations; and is led by a chief executive who arrived at the presidency with a declared aversion to nation-building. "We'll let our friends be the peacekeepers," candidate Bush said in a Houston speech on Sept. 16, 2000, "and the great country called America will be the pacemakers [sic]."

Let it not be said the neo-cons are without a legacy, despite the brief zenith of their influence.

Long after the days of "The smoking gun might come in the form of a mushroom cloud," "Shock and awe," "Mission accomplished" and "Bring 'em on" are mercifully past, historians will chronicle an early 21st-century America so distracted from its real enemy that Osama bin Laden and even the perpetrators of the 2001 anthrax attacks against Congressional leaders are still at large.

An America, too, whose diplomatic influence has cratered, due not only to the unilateral belligerence with which America went to war in Iraq, but also the incompetence subsequently exposed in almost every particular of its Iraq occupation: intelligence breakdowns; acrimonious relations between the civilian and military U.S. occupation leadership; rampant theft by contractors; and the failure to provide Iraqis with security, power, fresh water and other essentials even now, 43 months after the invasion. The resulting diplomatic void has been filled by China and Russia, now resisting U.S. calls for their imposition of sanctions against North Korea and Iran, respectively.

There also is the blighting of America's self-image as a champion of human rights, with U.S.-sanctioned torture of terrorist suspects Ramzi bin al-Shibh, Canadian citizen Maher Arar, and countless other detainees at Guantanamo Bay, at the network of covert CIA detention centres across Europe and the Middle East, and at Saddam Hussein's notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, reopened by U.S. forces to warehouse thousands of Iraqi citizens roused from their homes in random sweeps. Bush's repeated lie that "America does not do torture" merely compounds the current distrust of the United States.

And there is the discredited state of American conservatism, which has allowed neo-cons to trade away its electoral trump cards of perceived superiority over Democrats in foreign policy, national security and balancing the books. Infighting between the secular neo-cons and the GOP base of fiscal hawks and evangelical Christians will intensify after the expected Republican losses on Tuesday. And that will likely thwart Bush counsellor Karl Rove's ambition to make the GOP the permanent U.S. governing party.

Finally, there are the consequences of America's certain failure in Iraq.

Apart from the crisis of the boat-people evacuees, the fall of Saigon was not cataclysmic. Having achieved its goal of being left alone, Vietnam now peddles its wares at Wal-Mart and extends a warm greeting to American corporate investors.

The smug moral superiority of which Canadians are accused has nothing on Americans' self-regard as upholders of supreme moral authority.

The aftermath for Iraq, located in the world's most volatile region, will be a different story. Lacking the cultural homogeneity of Vietnam, Iraq may eat itself alive as at least a dozen ethnic enclaves nursing centuries-old grievances struggle for dominance or self-preservation. The chaos could infect neighbours, as Kurdish nationalists lay a more assertive claim to Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iran, and Shiites aligned with Tehran battle Shia factions loyal to Iraq.

Repeated U.S. State Department warnings about the obvious parallel between the humanitarian crisis in the Balkans after the death of strongman Josip Broz Tito and the break-up of Yugoslavia and the potential for anarchy after the removal of Saddam Hussein were brushed aside by Cheney, Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld, the central actors pushing for Saddam's rushed downfall.

Lifting the lid on that cauldron might eventually have been advisable. The aging Saddam wasn't going to rule forever. But doing so after rejecting elaborate plans from the State Department and other branches of the administration for a peaceful, multilateral occupation of Iraq amounts to something of a war crime. Rather than pacify the Middle East, as they intended, the neo-cons have managed to further destabilize it.

The chief hope now for Iraq is that, after 87 years of existence, Iraqi nationalism is a sufficiently potent force to prevail over sectarian rivalry, and that a respected central government emerges to secure the peace, rebuild a social and transportation infrastructure ravaged by three wars since 1980, and ensure an equitable distribution of oil wealth among 28.8 million Iraqis. And that a truly multilateral coalition emerges to help make those things happen.

For the purposes of this essay, neo-conservatism refers not to domestic policy; nor is it a global concept. Strictly speaking, "neo-conservatism" is a distinctly U.S. phenomenon calling for the projection of U.S. values worldwide, premised in an American belief in its moral authority that reaches back to the Founding Fathers. In the words of pamphleteer Thomas Paine, arguably the first neo-con: "The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind."

By the time Katharine Lee Bates, a teacher at Wellesley, the women's liberal arts college near Boston, was inspired by a train trip through the Great Plains to write her ode to America, her young nation already had deployed military forces to more than 30 countries, including neighbouring Canada and far-flung Egypt, the Philippines, Uruguay and Formosa.

The smug moral superiority of which Canadians are accused on occasions when they dissent from U.S. foreign policy has nothing on Americans' self-regard as upholders of supreme moral authority in the world. As President William McKinley explained, in justifying the occupation of the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico and other spoils of war captured from the Spanish at the dawn of the 20th century, "there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died."

In the latest iteration of American exceptionalism, manifested by today's neo-cons, "American hegemony is the only reliable defence against a breakdown of peace and international order." So wrote Kristol and Kagan in their seminal 1996 essay in *Foreign Affairs* magazine.

Or, more crudely, "We need to be more assertive and stop letting all these two-bit dictators and rogue regimes push us around and stop being a patsy for our so-called allies, especially in Saudi Arabia," said neo-con Max Boot, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, just prior to the Iraq invasion.

Or, more crudely still, "Every 10 years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small, crappy, little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business," said neo-con Michael Ledeen in an American Enterprise Institute forum.

While Kristol's Weekly Standard endorsed the worldly war hero John McCain for the presidency in 2000, the neo-cons were far luckier in the selection, by five justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, of George W. Bush, an empty vessel who knew less about the conventions of foreign policy than his well-travelled father had forgotten.

"Bush had a poor memory for facts and figures," Frum recalled following his abrupt departure from Bush's speechwriting shop after his authorship of "axis of hatred" (later modified to "axis of evil" by chief speechwriter Michael Gerson) was revealed to a wide network of friends by a spouse untutored in the cardinal rule of speechwriting (anonymity). "Fire a question at (Bush) about the specifics of his administration's policies," Frum said, "and he often appeared uncertain. Nobody would ever enrol him in a quiz show."

A delighted Richard Perle, a 30-year veteran of the Pentagon and a foreign-policy adviser on Bush's 2000-01 transition team, was equally blunt: "The first time I met Bush," he said, "two things became clear. One, he didn't know very much. The other was that he had the confidence to ask questions that revealed he didn't know very much."

That ignorance has been the neo-cons' undoing. Their vision might have survived the failure of its first test — in Afghanistan, where a resurgent Taliban is now spreading its influence in the south — but not the spectacular encore in Iraq, where an Iraqi middle class that initially welcomed Saddam's fall is now contemptuous of American occupiers who cannot provide them with more than two-and-a-half hours of electricity per day or end the sectarian firefights that keep many Iraqis from venturing to work or school.

Factual ignorance is a recurring neo-con theme, such as when aides to the new president were surprised to discover that the former Texas governor did not know the difference between Medicare and Medicaid, two of America's three largest government programs. Later, as planning for the Iraq invasion was getting underway, it would have to be explained to the decider-in-chief that Iraq was culturally divided among groups known as Shia, Sunni and Kurds.

Dick Cheney, whose knowledge of arms-control policy is limited to his belief that it is a form of appeasement, was tapping long-dormant brain cells in August 2002 when he asserted that, "Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction." Wolfowitz, a defence-policy veteran with no background in global oil production, should similarly have been asked on what authority he claimed, days before

the invasion in March 2003, that Iraq's oil revenues would pay for the neo-cons' Iraq rehabilitation project. "We're dealing with a country that can really finance its own reconstruction, and relatively soon," Wolfowitz said at that time.

Any expert in global oil politics could have informed the administration (and a credulous media) that after more than a decade of sanctions and Saddam's own neglect of Iraq's petroleum wealth (the dictator pumped enough oil to finance his army and 19 mansions, and not much more), Iraq's oil infrastructure was held together with reconditioned parts of 1950s vintage and was almost as degraded as Saddam's military prowess. Even assuming the absence of postwar insurgents who persistently targeted Iraq's oil wellheads and pipelines, billions of foreign dollars and at least a decade's time would have been required to modernize Iraqi oil and gas production to the point where it could meaningfully contribute to the rebuilding of Iraq — the world's largest oil-reserves holder where motorists must queue for imported gasoline.

As national security advisor in the new administration, future secretary of state Condoleezza Rice also suffered a knowledge deficit in matters most directly affecting her job. Richard Clarke, chief White House counter-terrorism advisor and a holdover from the Clinton administration, was taken aback in early 2001 to learn that Rice had never heard of Al Qaeda.

The former Stanford University provost is a student of Russian affairs, not a policy area of over-arching value when America's chief concern is violent expressions of Islamic fundamentalism. Given Rice's paucity of Middle East expertise, she was easily overpowered by Cheney, Wolfowitz, Libby, and other administration neo-cons who disdained both the CIA and the State Department as being, in their view, woefully behind the curve on Middle East political dynamics.

That's the context in which Rice, in her daily briefing of Bush aboard Air Force One en route to Crawford, Tex. on Aug. 6, 2001, counselled her boss not to read too much into that day's CIA report, entitled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S." It's why the president's national-security gatekeeper filtered out dozens of reports from the CIA and elsewhere in the administration throughout the spring and summer of that fateful year warning of a sudden spike in Al Qaeda activity.

On his last day in office, in the traditional meeting between retiring and incoming presidents, Clinton identified Al Qaeda to Bush as America's most pressing foreign-policy challenge. Yet later that same month, January 2001, Rice themed the first National Security Council meeting of the Bush presidency on the topic of "how Iraq is destabilizing the [Middle East] region." It was, to be sure, a Lewis Carroll moment, given that Iran and Saudi Arabia were widely known to be the region's leading exporters of terror. (The former bankrolls Hezbollah; the latter is homeland to bin Laden and 15 of the 19 hijackers of 9/11, who derived their astonishingly modest \$500,000 in Sept. 11 costs largely from Saudi backers.) Saddam, meanwhile, was a conspicuously weak pan-Arab laughingstock, having been bested in his eight-year war with Iran in the 1980s and by the U.S.-led coalition that drove him out of Kuwait in the Gulf War.

David Frum has said more than once that if Bush had not promptly launched a conventional war in the aftermath of 9/11, the president would have been ridden out of D.C. on a rail — a view shared by doves and hawks alike. ("Declare war on somebody! It doesn't matter what country," was Kagan's reaction to 9/11.) But it's not true. The job called for old-fashioned detective work. America's only unalloyed victory since 9/11 — the dispersal of Al Qaeda's network with the capture of many of its leaders — resulted from methodical intelligence gathering, and especially from the collaboration of American intel experts and a 155-year-old enterprise known as Western Union, whose interception of financial transactions by Al Qaeda and other terrorist operatives mapped the identity, location, and planned activities of entire networks of terrorist cells.

Come Wednesday, a Democratic-controlled House or Senate invested with subpoena power might begin, finally, to learn if the Bush administration was simply asleep at the switch prior to 9/11, or whether it deliberately chose to ignore a terrorist threat it didn't understand in favour of Iraq, a conventional target that suited its neo-conservative agenda.

Some supporters got off the neo-conservative bus earlier than others. The entire staff of liberal hawks at The New Republic endorsed John Kerry in 2004 and agonized in print over their misplaced faith in both Bush and the neo-con agenda. And that grand old man of American conservatism, William F. Buckley, conceded in an interview the same year with his long-time nemesis The New York Times that, "With the benefit of minute hindsight, Saddam Hussein wasn't the kind of extraterrestrial menace that was assumed by the administration one year ago. If I knew then what I know now about what kind of situation we would be in, I would have opposed the war."

In his new book, *After the Neocons*, apostate Francis (The End of History) Fukuyama, another original signer of Kristol's Project for a New American Century manifesto, publicly turned in his neo-con membership card. He was prompted to do so, he reports, after listening to a 2004 speech by Charles Krauthammer, the McGill-educated syndicated columnist and probably the last trained psychiatrist who will ever be mistaken by media peers as being invested with foreign-policy gravitas. In that speech, the irrepressible Iraq War shill described the mounting chaos in Iraq as a nearly unqualified success. Neo-conservatism, Fukuyama concluded, "has evolved into something I can no longer support."

As in Somalia, Haiti, Angola, the Philippines and Vietnam, where about four million Vietnamese died during the French and American military interventions of 1954-1975, the United States in Iraq will leave behind a mess. That has too often been the American way (the U.S.'s post-WWII occupations of Germany, Italy and Japan notably excepted): Invade. Make a bad situation worse. Leave. All with the best of intentions.

Harry Truman's foreign policy was unquestionably robust. Yet the Missourian understood that even a superpower benefits from self-restraint. Addressing the UN's founding convention in San Francisco in 1945, Truman said: "We all have to recognize — no

matter how great our strength — that we must deny ourselves the licence to do always as we please."

No reasonable person would urge a return to the U.S. isolationism that characterized the GOP as recently as the 1990s. When not under the sway of a Robert McNamara or Dick Cheney, America is indeed the "indispensable nation" of Bill Clinton's description. And Clinton proved it more than once by ending a Balkans genocide after years of dawdling by European powers, bailing out Mexico after a short-lived peso crisis, and brokering peace in Northern Ireland and East Timor.

It's possible that, after its humbling in Iraq, America will retreat into itself instead of rejoining the community of nations and the pursuit of truly consensual solutions to the crises of global injustice, impoverishment and environmental degradation.

In that case, the neo-cons will have earned their place in one of the inner circles of hell.

Additional articles by David Olive