

A Brief History of Modern Conservatism

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In 1959 at the end of an era of unseen American prosperity an intellectual named Daniel Bell wrote a book entitled “The End of Ideology”. In the book he laments that by the end of the fifties America had reached the end of it’s old ideological principles. The ideas of Marxism, and conservatism had lost power in peoples minds. In the conclusion of his books he says, “In the West, among the intellectuals, the old passions are spent. The new generation, with no meaningful memory of these old debates, and no secure tradition to build upon, finds itself seeking new purposes within a framework of political society that has rejected, intellectually speaking, the old apocalyptic and chiliastic visions.”¹ While Bell’s assertions about an absolute lose of previous political infatuations we not entirely true he was correct in predicting that a new breed of political ideology would be born in the 1960’s. One of the most pronounced, and well compiled of these new ideological movements will be that of Neo-Conservatism.

Born out of a reaction to the new American liberalism that began to drift more and more away from the center in the 1960’s the neo-con movement that emerged became a campaign to return to the form of the early American ideals. The movement decried the secularism and socialism that, in their view, had gripped the country. It remained, as much of the country was, staunchly anti-communist and pro-cold war while at the same time the new liberal movement was beginning to shy away from these mindsets as the war in Vietnam continued to escalate. The new conservatives called for a return to free economic markets, and the destruction of the regulatory system that had been put in place by the New Deal Liberals under Franklin Roosevelt.

As Justin Vaïsse comments on in his book *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, telling the history of a political or ideological movement can be tricky. There are

¹ Bell, Daniel. *The End of Ideology*. Daniel Bell, (October 6, 1995)

many parts in motion at the birth of an ideology, and so the question arises how does one best describe the factors in which this new movement is based on, and emerges from? This can be done by breaking the movement up in to different sections of ideologies, and then explaining the basis and background of each one individually. Then from that a larger picture of the ideology will emerge, and a larger narrative can be built around how the neo-conservative movement came in to being. The basis of the neoconservative movement can be broken down in to two areas of discussion. The social and ideological wing of the movement, and the economic wing. If this were an attempt at writing a current summation of the neoconservatives in America then a third wing would be added on for foreign policy, since now, after the Iraq wars, that is seen as one of the main ideological drivers of the group. But at the birth of the ideology they were more concerned with domestic politics, instead of foreign affairs. Again Vaïsse comments on this by saying, “Neoconservatism was born in the realm of domestic rather than foreign policy... neoconservatism was first of all a reaction to American liberalism, which took a left turn in the 1960s...”².

In order to set the stage for neoconservatism to emerge it is first useful to understand what the conservatives were reacting against at the beginning of the 1960’s. American liberalism had gone through a transition in the years after World War II. The New Deal Liberals which had dominated the ideological movement starting mainly in the 1930’s were coming under increasing criticism as their brand of left wing politics reminded Americans of the communism that they were beginning to actively fight against. The conservatives in the country focused their attacks on this American socialism in two different strands of thought. One area focused on the idea of

² Vaïsse, Justin. *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010). 6

communist subversion in American, an idea that depended on the fear held by most Americans against the notion of increasing government intrusion.³ Spurred on even more by Senator Joe McCarthy's persecution of perceived communist threats within the United States government. McCarthy, and his like, attributed a twisted definition to socialist practices in the New Deal era conflating them with Soviet communism. The second area of conservative attack focused on the idea of "creeping socialism". A term that was coined by the economist F.A. Hayek in his book *The Road to Serfdom*. The concept that overwrought state controls of production would result in a weakening of America was very powerful for many conservative Americans, and the idea that socialist policies were slowly beginning to take over American life was a massive selling point to conservative candidates. Senator Robert Taft famously used this attack in his bid for the republican presidential nomination in 1952 proclaiming that "The only way to avoid a creeping socialism is to elect a Republican Congress in 1950 and a Republican President in 1952"⁴.

The relentless attacks on New Deal Liberalism had won the republicans the presidency by 1952. It had driven the idea of socialism in to back corners of ideological and political debate. The idea of centralized government work was one that could not stand while America was at war with the communists. The conservatives had succeeded in crushing organized efforts by leftist politicians, while at the same time boosting their own ideology. However as is often the case in American politics the pendulum would begin to swing the other way and by the end of the decade public opinion turned against the persecutions of McCarthyism, and tirades against

³ Jefferys-Jones, Rhodri. *The American Left: Its Impact on Politics and Society since 1900*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013). 99

⁴ Taft, Robert A., and Clarence E. Wunderlin. *The Papers of Robert A. Taft: 1949-1953*. Vol. 4. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997). 149

socialism began to lose favor. By the 1960's the "New Left" movement had emerged, prompted and gaining strength from the countries reaction to the Vietnam War. The New Left would carry with it some holdovers from the New Deal liberals, but mainly would be an unorganized, and mainly ideological movement within the country. The group never really had a formal platform expression of it's views, which was in great contrast to the neo-conservative movement it was, which was very organized in the political world. The New Left instead focused it's efforts mainly around social movements in the country such as civil rights, feminism, and the campaigns against ever increasing poverty.⁵ In addition the New Left shifted its political focus away from the "working class" members of American society, and instead found an audience in the new young intellectuals, and students of the country, who would go on to heavily protest the Vietnam War, and conduct massive student movements. With these new platforms and ideologies American liberalism had made a great pivot to the left, more so than ever before in American politics.

The great burst of Neo-Conservative activism that will usher in the 1960's golden era would reflect, and be in great response to this far left movement. The economic, and cultural practices of the New Liberals will be in stark contrast to the American virtues that conservatives saw as hallmarks of United States society. Economically these conservative intellectuals decried Johnson's "War on Poverty" initiatives. Asserting that these policies were turning America in to a welfare state, and recalling the conservative fear of socialism that was so prominent in the 1950's. Socially these conservatives criticized the new "counter-culture" that was emerging on the liberally stimulated college campuses around the country. They saw the movement as

⁵ Jefferys-Jones, Rhodri. *The American Left: Its Impact on Politics and Society since 1900*. 119

hedonistic, individualist, and relativistic according to Vaïsse.⁶ The neoconservatives emerged in the 1960's as a much more hardline group than their predecessors.

So as we begin to look at the birth of neoconservatism we can plainly see that the ground swell of the movement was in response to the far left swing of the American liberals. But trying to nail down an actual birthdate for the movement is trickier. So many movements have birthdates, great speeches, or conventions that pull a group of people together. The signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Albeit perhaps a bit hyperbolic, all of these were great events that signified the beginnings of political movements. The beginnings of neoconservatism doesn't have a large event like that, instead the movement was more of a slow coalescing of ideas over time until the momentum of the thinkers in the movement, and the changing times solidified these thoughts in to one group.

The exact time that these ideologies finally completely came together in to what we would know as neoconservatism is still up for debate however. Some believe that the movement became official in the 1950's with the anti-communist movements of McCarthy and others, though this wouldn't account for the reaction against the New Left was formed in the 1960's. What can probably be attributed to the beginning of the neoconservative movement, or at least as close as could probably be nailed down is 1965. It was by 1965 that many former liberal professors began to launch ideological attacks on the, now fully formed, New Left and the counter culture that had emerged on college campuses.⁷ 1965 was also the year that the publication *The Public Interest* was founded by the intellectuals Daniel Bell, the author of *End of*

⁶ Vaïsse, Justin. *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*. 7

⁷ Vaïsse, Justin. *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*. 73

Ideology, and Irving Kristol. The magazine, who's central assumption was: that the political ideologies which had divided the country in the 1930's were over, would grow to become a well known neoconservative publication.⁸

As was said before the ideologies of the neoconservatism movement can be broken down in to two broad and separate categories of thought. "Social, and ideological", and "economic". Each of these aspects then feed in to a larger picture of the entire movement, as you take in to account the views held the majority of neoconservatives reflect these broad principles.

The basis for the social, and cultural stance of these new conservatives was one that had existed for decades, as the ideas of conservative thinking are not new, but in the 1960's the neoconservatives would bring the ideology a new life by activity supporting it with younger people who wanted to go against the counter culture, and anti-war positions that they saw in the country. The conservative ideology is one that can be described chiefly as a lamentation on the loss of the traditional. Whether that tradition is in religion, education, political practice, or society as a whole, it is always seen as something that is being taken away by the marching advancement of either the political elite, or changing society. The neoconservative mindset was also imbued with the idea of Christian principles, and historic romanticization. Which you can see in many writings from the decades around the beginnings of the movement.

William Buckley Jr.'s book *God and Man at Yale* is a good place to begin when trying to exemplify the conservative idea of lost traditions. The book written in 1951 has become, to some, a social bible for the neo-con movement, focusing primarily on the religious aspect of conservatism, the writing frames itself as a critique of the liberal education that Buckley received

⁸ Brooks, David. *40 Years Of Character*. (The New York Times. March 4, 2005.)

at Yale University. Yale was founded with the intent to break away from the more theocratic models of education at the time. In its charter it states “wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts and Sciences [and] through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church and Civil State.”⁹. The idea of a university dedicated to the arts and sciences was a big break from most universities founded at the same time, which focused mainly on theocratic pursuits, in fact Yale’s divinity school was not founded until 1822, twelve years after its college of medicine. None the less this did not stop Buckley from writing a scathing denouncement of its department of religious studies, along with the schools history department. In his book Buckley criticized Yale for not providing a proper teaching of lizzie-faire economics, and attacked the faculty of the school for being liberal minded socialists, who were not properly instructing students. Buckley mainly focused his criticisms on the Religious studies department at the college. He insists that the department had gone away from teaching actual religion, and instead focused to heavily on studying the philosophies of different religious, speaking of one professor, Mr. Lovett, Buckley says “ the widely admired university chaplain, teaches this course, but he does not proselytize the Christian faith, or indeed *teach* religion at all”¹⁰. This documentation on the loss of religious values at one of the nations most foremost universities became a conservative rallying call, and an example of the conservative tradition of bemoaning the loss of the traditional, the discussion of Yale’s goals towards religion not with standing, the idea that such a large university was preaching liberal ideology to the nations youth bolstered the ranks of the neo-con constituency, and attracted many young intellectuals to the movement.

⁹ *Yale History*. Yale University. (<http://www.yale.edu/about/history.html>.)

¹⁰ Buckley Jr., William F. *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of Academic Freedom*. (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2002). 5

Another place that the neoconservative social tradition can be seen is in the writings of Russell Kirk. Kirk was a graduate student at Duke University where, while enrolled in a history apprenticeship, wrote his graduate dissertation on John Randolph, a Virginia conservative politician whom the Heritage Foundation refers to as “one of the most eloquent and conservative Members of Congress in the 19th century”¹¹. Coming from the Heritage Foundation the bias is clear, but nonetheless the influence of this type of dissertation can be seen to have an effect on Kirk’s writings. Kirk’s writing about Randolph influenced his own personal beliefs, and pushed him much farther to the right than he was previously.

Kirk’s writings deal with conservative idea of historical romanticism. That is the idea that society was better off during times like the Old Antebellum South, or the Middle Ages. In his book *The Conservative Mind*, published in 1953, Kirk was attempting to trace the history of conservatism in America. In doing this the book attempts to present the idea that America had been founded, and continued to thrive on a tradition of conservatism. Kirk traces the history of American conservative thought all the way from the Irish politician Edmund Burke, a whig who stood for checks on governmental power, religious tolerance, and checks on international imperialism¹², up through the founding fathers like John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton, whom of Adams he called the “father of true conservatism”¹³, to conservatives in the American government just before the civil war, John Randolph, and John C. Calhoun, up in to finally the

¹¹ Edwards, Lee, Ph.D. *The Conservative Mind of Russell Kirk*. (The Heritage Foundation. October 23, 2014.)

¹² Kirk, Russell, and Aaron McLeod. *Great Conservative Minds: A Condensation of Russell Kirk’s “The Conservative Mind”*. (Birmingham, Alabama: Alabama Policy Institute, 2005).

¹³ Kirk, Russell, and Aaron McLeod. *Great Conservative Minds: A Condensation of Russell Kirk’s “The Conservative Mind”*

20th century. In this incredibly influential work Kirk was framing the social, and founding basis of American thought squarely in the conservative camp.

Kirks ideas about an America founded on conservatism are still massively popular and influential today as well. The Heritage Foundation, one of the foremost conservative organizations in the country says of Kirk, “How important has Russell Kirk been to the modern conservative movement? You can no more separate the two than you can separate the vine from the branches”.¹⁴ The Heritage Foundation piece continues and quotes well know conservative, and longest serving Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia who said of Kirk, “No one had a greater role in the formation of American conservative thought. And no more courteous (indeed, courtly) a gentleman, nor one devoted to the United States of America, could be imagined”.¹⁵ Justice Scalia’s words pretty well sum up the conservative thought on Russell Kirk. The tracing back of Americans history, and explaining it as a conservative one allowed the neoconservatives of the 60’s, and modern conservatives today a place to point to and insist that their point of view is correct based on the perceived history of the country. Russell Kirk represents the long held conservative idea of historical romanticization, but then also brings it forward in to the modern age by suggesting that American history was driven forward by conservative thought.

The basis of neoconservative economics was born out of a time a bit prior to the birth of the movement in the 1960’s. The very founding basis of the neo-con economic theory comes out of a reaction to the idea of “Keynesian Economics”. Put forward by the British economist John Maynard Keynes in the 1930’s the theory became the basis of New Deal liberal economic

¹⁴ Edwards, Lee, Ph.D. *The Conservative Mind of Russell Kirk*.

¹⁵ Edwards, Lee, Ph.D. *The Conservative Mind of Russell Kirk*.

thinking. The basic idea of Keynesian Economics is that government intervention in to the economy can help stabilize it, and that the government has an active role to play in the economic status of the country.¹⁶ Part of the way this theory took hold in the US was through the New Deal idea of “central planning” . Through this idea the US government came in and set up national job programs, such as the CCC, and WPA, to stimulate the economy and let people get back to work during the Great Depression.

The first major conservative pushback against this idea of central planning came from an economist named Fredrick Hayek. His 1944 book titled *The Road to Serfdom* would be considered by many to be the economic bible of the neoconservative movement. The book is a push back, and massive critique of the post-World War II British Labor Party. After the war the British government wanted to keep in place the war time controls of the economy to keep inflation stable. In his book Hayek refers to this a socialism, and insists that type of action will kill all types of forward progress. The book itself presents Hayek’s theories as a bleak presentation of how a nation will go from government programs, and central planning in to a 1984, Orwellian esque authoritarian dictatorship.¹⁷ This idea that socialism, and central planning will destroy thought, competition, and forward progress becomes the keystone of neoconservative economic thinking. This is the concept that leads to the idea of a complete separation of government, and commerce, and a total reliance on the “free market”, and capitalism to regulate the economy of a country.

¹⁶ Jahan, Sarwat, Ahmed Saber Mahmud, and Chris Papageorgiou. "What Is Keynesian Economics?" (Finance & Development 53, no. 3 2014).

¹⁷ Hayek, F. A. *The Road to Serfdom: The Condensed Version of "The Road to Serfdom" by F.A. Hayek as It Appeared in the April 1945 Edition of "Reader's Digest"*, (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2001.)

By the time the neoconservative movement emerges in the 1960's we can see this ideology firmly engrained in their thinking. In the fall of 1960 a large group of neoconservatives meet at the home of William Buckley, Jr, the writer of *God and Man at Yale* and now an editor for the conservative magazine *National Review*, to form the association "Young Americans for Freedom", which would act as an activist organization for young conservatives. The YAF would become one of the most influential political association in the country, and when they began they drafted a statement of principle, that came to serve as a defining statement of neoconservative ideology. In the statement, dubbed *The Sharon Statement*, we encounter lines like this: "That the market economy, allocating resources by the free play of supply and demand, is the single economic system compatible with the requirements of personal freedom and constitutional government"¹⁸ and "That when government interferes with the work of the market economy, it tends to reduce the moral and physical strength of the nation"¹⁹. Though this statement it's plain to see how the free market economic ideology put forward by Hayek had been completely absorbed in to conservative thinking by the birth of the neo-conservative movement.

During the birth of neoconservatism in the 1960's we also see the rise of predominate conservative economic theory that was written in that era, and for that audience. Milton Friedman is the most important voice at this time, and during the rapid expansion neoconservative thought in the sixties. Friedman was an economist, and know by some as the founder of neoconservative economic theory. He was staunchly anti-government, as were all neoconservative thinkers going back to Hayek, but Friedman's thinking extends in to personal

¹⁸ Young Americans for Freedom, *The Sharon Statement*. (The Heritage Foundation. September 11, 1960.)

¹⁹ Young Americans for Freedom, *The Sharon Statement*.

lives, and not just government policy. Friedman spells out his ideas in his book *Capitalism and Freedom*, written in 1962. In the book Friedman advocates taking government out of the economy, and an introduction in to the total free market. But along with that Friedman introduces the idea of individual responsibility. This thinking goes that the government has no responsibility to be involved with the economy, it has no responsibility for social programs, or subsidies. Instead it is the individual who has the responsibility for themselves. It is up to people to take care of themselves, and if they can not, then the government should not have to bail them out. In a lecture given at Stanford University in 1978 Friedman explains his views on individual responsibility like this, “[In response to a question about poverty] First of all the government doesn’t have responsibly, people have responsibility, this building doesn't have responsibility, you and I have responsibility, people have responsibility. Second of all, so far as poverty is concerned there has never been a more effective machine for eliminating poverty than the free enterprise system, and the free market.”²⁰. He continues his explanation by saying, “But next, If you look at the real problems of poverty, and denial of freedom to people in this country, almost every single on of them is a response of government action.”²¹ Friedman's views about personal responsibility verses government intervention have since become the foremost economic view held by neoconservatives, that is still reflected in Americas modern political practices today.

When looking in to the birth of the neoconservative movement something that is striking is how recent all of the ideas feel. The movement is not an old one, by historical standards neoconservative is practically modern, and is still shaping the American political landscape.

²⁰ Stanford University, Milton Friedman. *Responsibility to the Poor*. (YouTube video, 5:44. July 19, 2009.) (Note included in bibliography)

²¹ Stanford University, Milton Friedman. *Responsibility to the Poor*.

Whether it is through the founding of the Tea Party Movement in 2009, a response to many factors, but most amongst them the election of President Barak Obama. It can also be seen in the most recent republican presidential candidates. Senator Ted Cruz, who's trademark has almost become his incessant call to abolish the IRS²², to the constant battles in America over religious freedom laws²³, all of these items can be traced back to the founding of the neoconservative movement in the 1960's and some even to conservative ideology before that. The history of neoconservatism is still being written, but by examining the birth of the movement we are able to trace the social and economic attitudes of many Americans, and understand what has led to our current political climate.

²² Weiner, Rachel. *Ted Cruz: 'Abolish the IRS'*. (Washington Post. June 3, 2013.)

²³ Neuman, Scott. *Indiana's Governor Signs 'Religious Freedom' Bill*. NPR. (March 26, 2015).

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- This is a clip from a lecture Milton Friedman gave at Stanford University in 1978. His explanation is based on a question asked about poverty.

Weiner, Rachel. *Ted Cruz: 'Abolish the IRS'*. Washington Post. June 3, 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/06/03/ted-cruz-abolish-the-irs/>.

Neuman, Scott. *Indiana's Governor Signs 'Religious Freedom' Bill*. NPR. March 26, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2015/03/26/395583706/indianas-governor-signs-religious-freedom-bill>.

Start by marking "A Brief History Of The Modern American Conservative Movement" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving list. Want to Read. How times have changed. Some 50 years later, conservatism is a robust collection of ideas enunciated by top columnist and defended by leading scholars, embodied in powerful think tanks and influential foundations, and pe In 1950, literary critic Lionel Trilling wrote that the conservative impulse was at best made up of irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas. This booklet is a brief introductory history of the post-World War II revival of conservative thought that continues to shape our political life today. ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon. Such a study of the problem of defining conservatism is, I believe, a worthwhile enterprise, not only because of the intrinsic historical importance of modern conservatism, but also because of the light which our understanding of conservative thought may shed on the development of political theory as a whole during the last two centuries. 4 The most important writer to make this position the cornerstone of his definition of conservatism is probably Rossiter, Clinton in *Conservatism in America* (New York, 1955)Google Scholar. This position is defended and further references are given by Huntington, Samuel, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *American Political Science Review*, 51 (1957), 454-73CrossRef Google Scholar. The continuous modern history of the Conservative Party begins with the era of Disraeli, and he has perhaps the strongest amongst the many claims to be regarded as its founding father. In 1866 the collapse of the Whig ministry allowed a minority Conservative administration under the 14th Earl of Derby to tackle the question of extending the franchise. Shaped by Disraeli's adroit tactics in the Commons, the Second Reform Act of 1867 was a bold stroke which sought to protect Conservative interests and restore their credibility as a governing party. Most of the new voters were in the industr The modern conservative movement dates back to the 18th Century's Age of Reason, also known as The Enlightenment. Of course, the conservatives were against it. This was back when conservatives mostly had everything going their way. And so conservatives, themselves, choose the liberally-evolving Edmund Burke as the start of modern conservatism, not wanting to delve any further back in fear of utter embarrassment at the ranker forms of conservatism they would encounter. Burke's train of thought was on the right track, but he just wasn't too far out of the station, and was loathe to lose sight of it. Modern Liberalism and Modern Conservatism as Sociologies. One of the difficulties in describing political ideas is that the people who hold them are invariably more varied and complex than the ideas themselves. Take Southern Democrats, for example. With that caution, let us attempt a brief summary. As reflected on the editorial pages of *The New York Times*, in the *New Republic*, and in *Slate* and other forums, contemporary liberals tend to believe in an almost unrestricted right to abortion and actively encourage stem cell research and sometimes even euthanasia.