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Introduction

Barack Obama's election to the US presidency in 2008, and his re-election for a second term in 2012, appeared to confirm fully the demise of neoconservatism as an influence on US foreign policy. After the decisive defeat of the Republicans in the 2006 mid-term elections and the demise of the Project for a New American Century in the same year, Obama's initial victory in 2008 had rested in part upon his status as the 'un-Bush' and a clear commitment to restoring greater humility, legitimacy, legalism, and realism to America's international role. In subsequently defeating Mitt Romney in 2012, Obama not only triumphed against a Republican candidate who was apparently committed to re-embracing a more aggressive approach to foreign affairs but he also became the first Democratic candidate since John F. Kennedy to exploit a clear electoral advantage on questions of foreign policy and national security. Departing Iraq after a ten-year occupation, winding down America's longest ever war in Afghanistan, killing Osama Bin Laden, and toppling Colonel Qaddafi together proved that neither Republicans in general nor neoconservatives in particular enjoyed a monopoly on national security 'strength'.

But such an interpretation, while widely-held, is too simplistic, ignoring the continued resilience of neoconservatism as a public philosophy and of neoconservatives as a powerful, if very much a minority, presence within the US political and intellectual class. Declarations of the demise of neoconservatism, if anything, are now as comfortably regular and familiar as they are reliably premature. In 1995, for example, John Judis (1995) described neoconservatism as having become an 'anachronism' with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the founding fathers of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol, declared in his 1995 book, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, that the neocon 'impulse' had been absorbed within 'a larger, more comprehensive conservatism', while the following year another leading neoconservative intellectual, Norman Podhoretz, pronounced that 'neoconservatism is dead'. After what appeared its high - and to its critics, catastrophic - watermark of policy influence in the first George W. Bush administration, the leading liberal internationalist scholar, G. John Ikenberry, likewise confidently claimed the 'end of the neoconservative moment' in 2004.

In this chapter, the argument is advanced that neoconservatism is instead very much alive and, if not exactly well, in reasonably robust health. This is the result of three distinct but related factors. First, as an approach to foreign affairs - the domestic focus of the first generation of neocons having mostly lapsed - neoconservatism continues to offer a distinctive, conceptually coherent, but highly controversial set of principles and policy prescriptions that has adapted to changing domestic circumstances and international conditions.

Indeed, one of the more notable developments over recent years has been the growth of serious scholarly studies of neoconservatism and the appearance of an important academic debate as to exactly what key principles inform neoconservatism, the challenges it poses international relations theory, and whether and how neoconservatives have proven ascendant within the Republican Party. Second, international developments since 2009, and the Obama administration's responses to them, have both offered opportunities to neoconservatives to strongly critique the president's foreign policy but also demonstrated surprising elements of policy continuity with Obama's predecessor in the White House, in effect endorsing some of the more controversial neocon tenets while simultaneously limiting the purchase of some of their

own critique. Third, the network of neoconservative individuals and institutions has remained vibrant and resilient within Washington, DC. As the course of the 2012 Republican Party primaries and the Romney campaign illustrated, traditional realists and libertarians - while still present in the ranks of the GOP and on Capitol Hill - have been effectively marginalized by a neoconservative strand that has proven tenacious in its ability to exert influence on Republican foreign policy ideas and within the broader conservative movement.

Taking Neoconservatism Seriously

Although neoconservatism has been an influential presence in American political thought since the 1960s, only recently has academic study of neoconservatism caught up with the phenomenon (see Stelzer 2005; Heilbrunn 2008; Rapport 2008; Rathbun 2008; Homolar-Riechmann 2009; Ryan 2010; Vaisse 2010; Drolet 2011). While such attention has had minimal popular impact - unfortunately, 'neocon' remains in essence a pejorative synonym for 'war monger'/'far rightist' in popular parlance and the press on both sides of the Atlantic - it nonetheless represents an important and interesting development. Although the questions of what neoconservatism is, how it differs from traditional conservatism, and who counts as a neoconservative, all remain contested - not least since IR theorists, political scientists, and historians tend to emphasize different aspects and some erstwhile neocons reject the label two aspects of this debate merit particular emphasis.

First, recent scholarship on neoconservatism has provided interesting and important insights into the thinking of neoconservatives, such that a genuine debate now exists among academics and public intellectuals as to the key ideas and principles informing the persuasion (neoconservatism never having been a 'movement'). In particular, since the evolution of neoconservatism has now left it principally concerned with foreign policy, academic divisions tend to centre on the relationship between neoconservatism, realism, liberalism, and American nationalism, and the degree to which neoconservatives genuinely believe in idealism and, especially, the American 'export' of democracy.

In arguably the most comprehensive, dispassionate, and balanced analysis of neoconservatism, Justin Vaisse (2010) identifies three generations of neoconservatives, with five key guiding tenets to the persuasion in its contemporary, 'third-generation' guise today:

- the need for the US to play an active world role to assert and defend an American-led world order to ensure peace and security;
- the importance of political regime type to external behaviour (and hence the desirability of democracy promotion and the dangers posed by authoritarian regimes);
- the essentially 'benevolent' nature of US empire or hegemony for international order and peace;
- the freedom of the US to act unilaterally, the desirability of multilateralism notwithstanding;
- and the need for massive US military resources and the political will to use them (Vaisse 2010: 232-6).

While neoconservatism is thus conventionally viewed as an emphatically right-wing doctrine, as Michael Williams (2005: 327) observes, it 'is neither totally hostile toward, nor opposed to, the liberal tradition as a whole. On the contrary, neoconservatism emerges out of a clearly identifiable liberal tradition and an engagement with its dilemmas.' Or, as Vaisse puts it, while it 'looks more like a branch of conservatism than a branch of liberalism, at any rate on domestic issues', foreign policy is different:

The neoconservatives' Wilsonianism, their moralism, their penchant for upsetting the status quo, and their defense, for foreign policy reasons, of a strong state with a powerful military - all

these are traits that neoconservatives share more with liberals than conservatives. After all, as a philosophy, the default position of conservatism in foreign policy tends to be isolationist (as the Republican party was until the 1940s), or, when isolationism is no longer tenable, it tends to be realist and prudent, not to say cynical, rather than interventionist (2010: 278).

By contrast, several scholars dispute this analysis strongly. Drolet (2011), for example, views such an interpretation as 'naive', arguing instead that while neocons are indeed 'moralising supporters of a strong and expansionist militaristic state', neoconservatism is in fact inimical to liberalism, which is 'about self-determination, collective security, institutions, international law, and the transformation of the international state of anarchy into a global constitutional order of human rights' (2011: 207). Neoconservatism instead owes its provenance to a particular disturbing type of *realpolitik*, a Straussian belief in the utility of the 'noble lie' and a Nietzschean 'will to power'. Ryan (2010), similarly, argues against the idealistic elements of neoconservatives, claiming that maintenance of a unipolar world, rather than democracy promotion, was the guiding tenet for neoconservatives during the 1990s and since.

Teasing out the complex arguments and subtle distinctions underlying this debate is beyond the scope of this chapter. But two broad points are worth making.

First, a fair reading of contemporary neoconservative thinking - certainly since the 1990s - reveals it to be especially preoccupied with the indispensability of American power and the geostrategic primacy of the United States. To castigate neocons for blindly promoting the blanket export of democracy (invariably 'at the point of a gun') is as misplaced as, at the other extreme, suggesting that democracy promotion and human rights represent mere fig-leaves barely covering a fundamentally sinister agenda of American imperialism. As such, as Lynch (2011: 347) argues, there exists 'sufficient history to suggest that neoconservatism, rather than a recent aberration, actually represents a consensus position within US national security policy and embodies much of the American foreign policy tradition...' And as even those critics such as Ryan inadvertently note, actually reading neoconservative writings suggests that democracy promotion is a part of neoconservative thinking, but that its support is selective, contingent, and willing to be directed to non-military and patient means: a 'democratic realism', in Charles Krauthammer's (2004) formulation, not a 'democratic globalism'.

Second, perhaps the most persuasive conclusion about the competing interpretations of neoconservatism is that drawn by Vaisse, when he identifies third-generation neoconservatism as 'an avatar of American nationalism, as the expression of underlying nationalism that has been present since the country was born, a reincarnation of Wilsonianism in a new, more martial form' (2010: 278). That is, neoconservatism marries the idealistic, Wilsonian strand of national ideology with a Jacksonian willingness to maintain and extend a balance of power that favours political and economic freedom. The two strands are, for neoconservatives, inextricably interlinked, separating them from both liberals placing undue faith in international law and institutions over the calculus of power, and from realists placing insufficient faith in the centrality of values as well as interests.

Such an interpretation helps to explain the convergence of neoconservatives with other conservatives (nationalists, realists, and 'theo-cons'), as well as the longevity of the neoconservative persuasion. For, somewhat ironically - given the scholarly rivalry over its appropriate political location - the second striking feature of the contemporary academic debate concerns the general consensus that neoconservatism is likely to remain an important and influential force on US foreign policy. As Williams (2005: 329) argued, neoconservatism 'possesses a powerful political logic and a rhetorical strategy - it is unlikely simply to fade away'. Similarly, Jacob Heilbrunn (2008: 280) concluded a highly hostile and tendentious analysis by warning that, while liberal critics 'persist in acting as though neoconservatism were a phenomenon that has run its course', 'Prophets are not easily dissuaded from their crusade' and neocons would plausibly 'regroup, reassess, and retrench'. In a more balanced assessment, as Vaisse (2010: 269-70) put it:

Neocons can continue to boast a vibrant intellectual network, a capacity to influence the public debate, a clear vision of America's role in the world - and this vision is grounded in an increasingly large historiography of their own. To influence American foreign policy again, all they need is the alignment of a mobilized and interventionist public opinion and a sympathetic administration, as in 1980-1985 and 2001-2005. Given the cyclical character of American foreign policy, such a moment will probably present itself again in the next decades.

That consensus appears to have been at least partially vindicated by developments since 2009.

Obama, Romney, and the neoconservatives

While many of the left had hoped, and many of the right feared, that an Obama administration would represent a decisive rejection of the foreign policies of George W. Bush, the president's record demonstrated a surprising and substantial amount of continuity with that of his unloved predecessor. In particular, on matters of national security, even as his administration stressed the virtues of 'engagement', Obama continued - and in some cases substantially expanded — the more aggressive and forward-leaning aspects of the Bush years (Singh 2012). Even sympathetic observers, who described Obama as a 'progressive pragmatist' on international affairs, nonetheless conceded that 'the continuity from George W. Bush has been most evident in regard to war fighting on the one hand and democracy promotion in the Middle East on the other' (Indyk *et al.* 2012: 259).

Although substantial dissensus surrounds Obama's foreign policy, both in terms of how best to categorize the president and in terms of its effectiveness in securing America's national interests, few observers dispute that the national security strategy that the administration has pursued has been assertive in its employment of hard power. The American diplomatic historian, Walter Russell Mead (2011a), even went so far as to argue provocatively that, 'in general President Obama succeeds where he adopts or modifies the policies of the Bush administration. Where (as on Israel) he has tried to deviate, his troubles begin':

The most irritating argument anyone could make in American politics is that President Obama, precisely because he seems so liberal, so vacillating, so nice, is a more effective neo-conservative than President Bush. As is often the case, the argument is so irritating partly because it is so true... President Obama is pushing a democracy agenda in the Middle East that is as aggressive as President Bush's; he adopts regime change by violence if necessary as a core component of his regional approach and, to put it mildly, he is not afraid to bomb. But where President Bush's tough guy posture ('Bring 'em on!') alienated opinion abroad and among liberals at home, President Obama's reluctant warrior stance makes it easier for others to work with him.

Indeed, in a briefing with reporters prior to his 2012 State of the Union message, Obama even expressed effusive praise for an essay by perhaps the most prominent and prolific neo-conservative, the historian Robert Kagan, in *The New Republic* - 'Not fade away: the myth of American decline', drawn from his 2012 book, *The World America Made* - that was, ironically, partly intended as a critique of Obama and a standard neoconservative reassertion of the need for 'constant' American global leadership and commitment. (Kagan [2010] had argued previously that Obama had overturned half a century of national security doctrines by accepting that America's decline, economically and militarily, was inevitable.)

Much as had previously occurred with Bill Clinton in the 1990s, neoconservatives faced two sets of principal domestic opponents: the Democratic occupant of the White House and his allies on Capitol Hill, and the realists, paleo-conservatives, and libertarians within the

Republican Party. Such a dual front created particular problems on issues of military intervention. For example, just as neoconservatives had divided over Clinton's interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo (with some, such as Charles Krauthammer, opposing them), so they were divided over Obama's support for action against Libya in 2011, intervention in Syria, and support for the 'Arab Awakening'. While Obama's own response was hardly consistent in these cases, and certainly appeared more ad hoc and reactive than strategic, the same basic questions caused his critics major problems. Should the United States support the overthrow of traditional authoritarian allies such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, even if the consequence was the coming to power of more hostile groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and a deterioration in the regional context for Israel's security? Should Washington encourage democratic reform if this empowered a virulently anti-American 'Arab street'? Should the United States intervene in Syria to overthrow Assad and support popular self-government, or eschew yet another Middle Eastern military campaign at the cost of subsequent deep popular resentment?

While not entirely unified on the answers to the questions, neoconservative criticism of Obama has tended to coalesce and focus on three aspects of his approach: first, that he was retreating from important areas of strategic commitment, and doing so too rapidly, embracing a 'pivot' to Asia when both relations with Europe and America's presence in the Middle East remained vital, and determining deadlines for withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan on the basis of his domestic political needs rather than 'conditions on the ground'; second, that he was insufficiently assertive towards America's antagonists - most notably, Russia, China, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela - and insufficiently solicitous of its allies (especially the United Kingdom and Israel, the latter of which Obama did not even visit until March 2013); and thirdly, that Obama's focus on 'nation-building at home' was weakening America's ability to lead globally, undermining the military strength and preparedness of the United States, and emboldening its enemies. In failing to tackle America's \$16 trillion debt and annual budget deficits in excess of \$ 1 trillion, in agreeing to cuts to the defence budget, and being willing to allow 'sequestration' to go forward - imposing further reductions on the Pentagon -the president was gutting America's military preeminence at precisely the wrong moment. That Defence Secretary Leon Panetta had to cancel the deployment of an aircraft carrier, the *USS Truman*, in February 2013, due to insufficient funding, was a vivid illustration of such dangers.

Much of this neoconservative critique was anticipated and appropriated by the Romney campaign against Obama in 2011-12. Indeed, with the exceptions of the brief campaign of the moderate internationalist Jon Huntsman, and the neo-isolationist Ron Paul, all of the candidates for the 2012 GOP presidential nomination articulated strongly hawkish views congenial to neoconservatives. Mann and Ornstein (2012) argue that the current era of 'asymmetric polarization' in the United States has been primarily driven by a Republican Party that has drifted much further to the right than the Democrats have to the left, with the former now an 'insurgent outlier - ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; un-persuaded by conventional understandings of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition' (2012: xiv). But while they focused on domestic matters, foreign policy too has seen a sharp shift to a more hawkish stance. As the endorsement of Obama by Colin Powell in both 2008 and 2012 suggested, even Republican realists - RINOs, or 'Republicans In Name Only' to their conservative critics - have increasingly migrated to the Democratic Party.

In his 2008 bid for the GOP presidential nomination, Romney's foreign policy credentials had been weak and he was criticized by John McCain, Rudi Giuliani, and others for insufficient conservatism (the bulk of neoconservatives aligned with McCain and Giuliani rather than Romney). By 2012, as on other issues, the former Massachusetts governor had apparently shifted to a much more hawkish stance, describing Russia as America's 'number one geopolitical foe', calling for the return of 'enhanced interrogation' techniques and the doubling of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility's detainees, criticizing Obama for an 'apology tour' and

insufficient expression of American exceptionalism, pledging increased support for Israel and the use of military force against Iran if its nuclear aspirations advanced further. Reviewing his speeches and statements on foreign affairs, Andrew Sullivan (2012) described Romney as 'clearly much more neoconservative than Bush', an impression reinforced by the team of foreign policy advisers he assembled, which included Robert Kagan, Dan Senor, Eric Edelman, John Bolton, and Eliot Cohen. Berman (2012) was one of several observers who characterized the team as a 'neocon war cabinet' that was more rightist than that of George W. Bush. Mehdi Hasan (2012) similarly declared the Romney campaign to be 'basically, Neocon Central' - noting that of the 24 'special advisers' on foreign policy listed on the official Romney campaign's website, '17 of the 24 advisers worked as senior officials in the Bush/Cheney administration' and none of the 24 'disowns or regrets the Iraq invasion; few speak of Palestinians as anything other than terrorists; almost all of them want to increase spending on the US military and they share a Manichaean view of a world in which America is the sole superpower'.

Aside from the perennial problem of definition here - where critics lump together neo-conservatives and conservative nationalists, an important distinction where the latter tend to be far more numerous than the former - a less feverish and more accurate assessment suggests that Romney's advisers represented a broad balance between neoconservatives, traditional strong defence conservatives, and realists. Nonetheless, while it remains true that the balance was probably tilted against realists - in nominating Robert Zoellick as the head of his provisional transition team, Romney encountered significant internal party criticism, for example - inferring too much from the cast of campaign advisers is unwise. As David Milne (2012: 946) rightly argued, 'little in his resume suggests that Romney is a neo-conservative in the making. Romney is pursuing a bellicose strategy vis-a-vis Obama's alleged passivity because he believes it will resonate with voters - not because it comes from within'. Romney's knowledge of, interest in, and genuine positions on foreign policy were also notoriously opaque. On Iran, for example, his statements equivocated between denying the Islamic Republic a nuclear 'capability' and a 'weapon', while his prescriptions oscillated between military action and, as he put it in an 8 October 2012 speech to the Virginia Military Institute, 'new sanctions'. Perhaps most notably, in the third presidential debate, Romney sketched out virtually no substantive differences with President Obama and instead sought regularly to shift the debate to domestic issues, finally recognizing that out-hawking Obama was not only very difficult but also, politically, highly risky and electorally unappealing.

Exactly who would have made it to the key positions in a Romney national security team necessarily remains a matter of speculation. Similarly, whether or not neoconservatism represented, as Herman (2012: 17) contended, 'an ideology of convenience' for Romney to gain the party's nomination remains unclear. Gideon Rachman (2012) probably had the assessment correct when he argued that, 'My guess is that his inner core, if he has one, would incline him to a coldly pragmatic foreign policy rather close to that of Mr Obama. Mr Romney is an establishment man and his campaign does not suggest he is driven by unbending principle.' While Milne (2012: 949) exaggerated when he claimed that 'if Romney does win the election in November, neo-conservatives are likely to find his administration as unwelcoming as Wilsonians have found Obama's' - neocons would certainly have gained positions in the foreign policy and national security decision-making apparatus - he was right to note that Obama and Romney were both pragmatic, results-driven, and wary of ideological straitjackets.

Even so, this raises one final question worth examination: why has a notably small and loose network of neoconservatives remained such an influential force in the Republican Party and the broader conservative movement after the neoconservative brand appeared to have become politically toxic, having been apparently discredited by the Iraq War and with neocons articulating positions on international affairs that seem out of sync with majority American public opinion?

Three related explanations perhaps provide the optimal answer.

First - and in spite of its 'un-naming' - as the continuation of the war on terror under Obama suggests, key elements of the neoconservative analysis of hard security threats and the necessary policy responses have won and maintained much broader political support than just the neocon 'cabal'. The legitimacy of preventive military action (albeit not on the scale of the Iraq invasion), the vast expansion of the drone programme and extra-judicial assassinations, the maintenance of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, the continued use of rendition and surveillance, and the use of cyber and covert warfare against the Iranian nuclear programme under Obama together - at least implicitly - validated several neocon prescriptions. Moreover, the success of the 'surge' policy in Iraq, and its extension in 2009-11 to Afghanistan, allowed neoconservatives to claim that they, rather than realists and libertarian anti-interventionists who (like Obama) had opposed the surge in 2007, were the ultimate authors of 'success' in the two theatres. However implausible that appears to their critics, as Lynch (2011: 349) argued, liberal interventionists and neoconservatives have long been de facto relatives in the same broad foreign policy family and the 'implicit co-optation of a neoconservative agenda by Barack Obama further reduces the range of opposition strategies. Assertions that the GOP will remain the party of national security may rely increasingly on nostalgia.' In that sense, the very success of hawkish approaches has undermined the distinctiveness of the neocon international agenda.

Second, the balance of foreign policy influence in the Republican Party has arguably shifted further in the neoconservatives' direction since the end of the Bush years, at least when they can link forces with conservative nationalists. As Vaisse (2010: 266) observes, neoconservatives have 'won the battle against their archenemies, the realists, for the soul of the Republican party' (though his claim that they also exercise 'dominance in the Washington foreign policy community' is a stretch too far). In part, this is a function of the decline of traditional realists in the Henry Kissinger, George H.W. Bush, James Baker, and Brent Scowcroft moulds, either through them drifting to the Democrats or departing the political scene. But neocons have also renewed themselves with younger acolytes while realists have largely failed to reproduce younger generations of Republican cohorts. As the GOP has steadily lost support in the Northeast and West of the United States, and as the activism of groups such as the Tea Party have helped to defeat moderate and realist Republican incumbents (such as Senator Richard Lugar [R-Ind], defeated in a primary election in 2012), so the ranks of self-declared realists in Congress have been depleted. Moreover, as service on the Foreign Relations Committee has become less attractive to many aspirant and ambitious Senators, so the ranks of those active in and knowledgeable on foreign affairs have become fewer. As the opposition to the nomination of former Republican Senator Chuck Hagel as Defence Secretary in Obama's second term, testified-the Senate Armed Services Committee approved his nomination on 12 January by a straight party line vote, 14—11, with all eleven GOP Senators voting against - the contemporary Republican Party on Capitol Hill maintains a decidedly hawkish position.

While many critics bemoan this shift - according to one account (Kabaservice 2012: 385), 'The Bush years demonstrated anew that conservatives were skilled at politics but deficient at governing, and that a Republican Party without moderates was like a heavily muscled body without a head' - this was not merely an elite phenomenon. Beyond presidential and congressional politics, there exists a broader partisan divide over foreign policy. As Vaisse (2010: 267) notes, 'basic political attitudes within the Republican party seem to have aligned, if not with the neocons per se, at least with a hawkish and interventionist version of foreign policy, while Democrats and independents seem to have remained firmly in the realist camp'. Surveys by the Pew Research Center, Gallup, and others now reliably demonstrate Democrats preferring diplomacy over force, multilateral action over unilateral, and the importance of the United Nations. Republicans tend to veer in a more hawkish, interventionist, and unilateral direction.

Third, the multiple nodes of the neocon network remain active, interconnected and together constitute a powerful presence within the Beltway. As Heilbraunn (2008: 279) observed, 'The sheer scale of the neoconservative network, which includes the AEI, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the *Weekly Standard*, the Committee on the Present Danger, and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, means that it has become part of the Washington establishment'. Indeed, one should now add to these groups others: the Foreign Policy Initiative, in effect the successor to PNAC, founded by Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan in 2009, whose mission statement echoes that of its controversial predecessor ('The challenges we face require 21st century strategies and tactics based on a renewed commitment to American leadership', entailing continued engagement, support for democratic allies, the spread of political and economic freedom, and a 'strong military with the defense budget needed to ensure that America is ready to confront the threats of the 21st century'); the opinion pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Post*, a congenial environment and an outlet for figures such as Kristol, Steven Hayes, Charles Krauthammer, and others at the Fox News channel; and other think tanks that, while not strictly neocon in orientation, have some overlapping issue agendas and policy positions, such as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Heritage Foundation, the Hudson Institute, and, in Europe, the Henry Jackson Society and the European Convention on Liberal Democracy. Indeed, the breadth of links is perhaps most eloquently demonstrated by Robert Kagan's presence as a senior fellow at one of the leading centre-left think tanks, the Brookings Institution, rather than the AEI. The ability of neoconservatives not only to gain a public hearing for their views, but also to forge links with other conservatives and even some liberal internationalists, continues to amplify their political clout - and their intellectual contribution to the framework of mainstream American foreign policy - considerably beyond what it would otherwise be.

Conclusion

Looking forward, the short to medium-term prospects for neoconservatism appear mixed. On the one hand, as argued above, the institutionalization of the neocons in Washington makes them a permanent and influential presence in the Republican Party, in debates over US foreign policy, and as part of the wider conservative movement. It may be going too far to argue, as Heilbraunn (2008: 278) has, that it 'will take an insurgency inside the GOP to dislodge the neoconservatives' but, in terms of access, expertise, and the ability to reach a wider public, neocons have proven remarkably adept and effective political operators. Moreover, given the on-going changes in the international system and the continuing global and regional challenges to US interests, values, and power from state and non-state threats alike, neoconservative prescriptions on the necessity of US leadership, the legitimacy of unilateral action, and the desirability of a strong defence and robust military appear likely to endure rather than disappear. As disappointed progressives have discovered since 2009, even a Democratic president reluctant to wage war sometimes cannot escape the combination of serious security threats, a limited menu of effective policy responses to them, inadequate institutions such as the United Nations Security Council, poorly resourced NATO allies, and the occasional necessity of deploying unilateral US military force.

But neoconservatives face three major medium-term challenges of consequence, ones that together raise substantial doubts as to whether, in Vaisse's terminology, 'the alignment of a mobilised and interventionist public opinion and a sympathetic administration' is likely to arise again in the 2010s or thereafter.

First, as Obama's 2012 victory graphically attested, the changing demographics of the American electorate pose significant hurdles to a Republican regaining the White House - even if the distribution of the GOP vote reliably helps its prospects for majorities in Congress. While it remains too soon to conclude that the 'emerging Democratic majority' has finally arrived, if the

GOP proves unable to win a presidential election in 2016, neoconservatives will again be denied policymaking positions in the next administration. And while influence in Congress and the wider Washington community is not insignificant, genuine foreign policy heft depends critically on a strong presence in the councils of the executive branch's decision-making apparatus. A Romney victory in 2012 would not have been, and a Republican presidential win in 2016 would not be, a sufficient guarantor of a revived and extensive neoconservative influence on US foreign policy - but, at minimum, it represents a necessary condition. Even then, if a Republican president is sworn into office in January 2017, it may plausibly be a popular centrist figure - a Chris Christie or a Jeb Bush - unlikely to emerge from the neocon ranks of the party.

Second, American public opinion currently remains deeply hostile to many of the more militaristic, interventionist, and imperialistic aspects of the neoconservative agenda. Ironically, at least in part, this actually vindicates neoconservative warnings - articulated in the 1990s under Clinton and again against Obama since 2009 - that a failure by the president to articulate a compelling foreign policy vision would erode public support for a vigorous US leadership role in the world. After the polarizing Bush years and the Great Recession, there were unmistakable signs of the American public becoming increasingly insular, war fatigued, and resistant to the US role of 'world policeman'. Obama's presidency, in focusing so relentlessly on domestic affairs, eschewing an emphasis on the US global leadership role, and embracing a strategy of 'leading from behind' has arguably compounded not just an understandable war-weariness but also a less propitious neo-isolationist tendency favouring strategic withdrawal and opposed to interventionism. Although this has yet to represent a seismic tectonic shift away from internationalism - and it is worth recalling that only five years after the Vietnam War's end, Americans elected Ronald Reagan to the White House - it does pose severe difficulties for neoconservatives seeking greater, not less, international engagement, intervention, and 'forward leaning' leadership from Washington.

Third, but related, the internal politics of the Republican Party remain markedly fluid, fractious, and volatile. Colin Dueck, the foremost analyst of the GOP and foreign policy, rightly argues that while important fissures exist between conservative realists, hawks, nationalists, and anti-interventionists, the default position of the contemporary party is Jacksonian (2010, 2012). The key story of the party, its internal differences notwithstanding, is how an isolationist GOP shifted steadily but inexorably after the 1940s to being strongly interventionist and, in relation to the Pentagon, strongly in favour of 'big government'. While the anti-interventionist Ron Paul drew enthusiastic and young Republican voters to his cause in 2008 and 2012, and while paleo-conservatives such as Pat Buchanan and faith-based interventionists such as Mike Huckabee remain active, neoconservatives tend to be able to cross paths with most other dominant tendencies in the party, amplifying their relatively meagre numbers and substantially increasing their audience and influence. As Mead (2011b) contends, even within the populist, anti-establishment Tea Party movement - whose principal foreign policy concern is preserving American sovereignty - the Palinite wing is currently stronger than the Paulite one.

But this may yet change as the tensions between competing factions, and between competing policy priorities, grow. In a speech to the Heritage Foundation on 6 February 2013 that caused major waves within the party - and probably represented his opening salvo in a bid for the 2016 GOP presidential nomination - Senator Rand Paul (R-KY), son of Ron, sought to challenge directly what he saw as an unfortunate and stifling bipartisan orthodoxy over foreign policy, citing the wisdom of George Kennan and calling for a 'return to a true conservative foreign policy'. Rejecting the labels of both neoconservative and isolationist, Paul instead claimed the mantle of 'realism' and cautioned about the limits of American power. Robert Merry (2013), editor of the self-consciously realist publication *The National Interest*, declared the speech 'seminal' for both the party and, potentially, the nation:

This is consequential in itself, given the sway of the neocon philosophy over GOP thinking since the early days of George W. Bush and the paucity of enthusiasm for realist convictions. When such a prominent Republican senator embraces the realist label, it presents just a hint of a possibility that a foreign-policy debate actually could emerge in a Republican Party long frozen in the tundra of neocon thinking.

As Robert Kagan (2013) trenchantly noted in response, however, exactly how Paul justified his supposed dissenting credentials was rather opaque:

Paul sounds conventional. He calls himself a 'realist,' but unlike many realists, he sees the overriding threat to America as 'radical Islam,' which he describes as a 'relentless force' of 'unlimited zeal,' 'supported by radicalized nations such as Iran' and with which the United States is indeed at 'war' and will be for a long time. Unlike critics during the Cold War, who argued that anti-communist 'paranoia' produced a self-destructive foreign policy, Paul embraces the dominant 'paranoia' of the post-9/11 era. He may have a realist's contempt for the supposed ignorance of the average American, who, he claims, is 'more concerned with who is winning "Dancing With the Stars".' But he nevertheless shares the average American's view that radical Islam is today what Soviet Communism was during the Cold War - 'an ideology with worldwide reach' that must, like communism, be met by 'counterforce at a series of constantly shifting worldwide points'.

Paul's strategy may yet prove politically and electorally savvy, as a means to straddle those competing forces within the party's conservative coalition: fiscal conservatives preoccupied with cutting the deficit and debt; hawks committed to a robust Pentagon; anti-interventionists still haunted by Bush's wars; and nationalists who continue to believe in American primacy but at a reduced cost in blood and treasure alike. But, as Kagan's commentary implicitly suggested, there already exists a party that is sceptical of foreign military entanglements, mindful of limited resources, and more inclined towards realism, diplomacy, and soft power than militarism. Ironically, as a nascent neocon critique might argue, in imitating the Obama record, it is actually the Paul approach that is likely to cast US foreign policy more firmly in the conformity of a bipartisan straitjacket. As such, the Paul strategy of 'Democratic Party lite' is unlikely to be congenial to either Republican elected officials or the GOP rank and file. And neoconservatives are likely to be in the forefront of making that 'clear and present danger' readily apparent for several years to come, even if their exercise of power continues to prove an elusive quest.

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