

# *The Journal of Peace, Prosperity and Freedom*

MARCUS M. WITCHER

## Two Visions, One Future: How Neoconservative Preemptive War Isolated Libertarians

**ABSTRACT:** Neoconservatism, with its emphasis on an assertive United States foreign policy, became politically prominent during the Reagan presidency and later during George W. Bush's administration. In the wake of Iraq, libertarians and non-interventionist conservatives have called for a rethinking of American foreign policy and an end to preemptive military strikes. The candidacy of Ron Paul and the rise of the liberty movement are currently seen as outside of the conservative mainstream. Paul's view favouring non-interventionist foreign policy, however, is not an aberration. In fact it has deep roots in the American conservative intellectual tradition. The paper analyzes the rhetoric between neoconservatives and libertarians leading up to and after the invasion of Iraq, demonstrates the deep division in American conservatism and explains the rise of the liberty movement in the United States.

**AUTHOR:** Marcus Witcher (mmwitcher@ua.edu) earned a BA from the University of Central Arkansas where he majored in history and minored in economics. He earned his MA from the University of Alabama in 2013 and is working on his PhD. Most of his research focuses on political and economic history and he plans to write his dissertation on the rise of modern conservatism in the United States.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States of America emerged as the world's hegemon. The role that it should play internationally, however, was unclear. Debates raged between Republicans and Democrats over how involved the United States should be around the world. In

fact, even within the Republican Party there was no consensus as to what should shape foreign policy. Neoconservatives and libertarians argued throughout the 1990s and early 2000s about the role of the United States around the world. The ascendancy of neoconservative foreign policy in 2001 under President George W. Bush and his administration isolated libertarians leading many of them to break from the party.

The neoconservative element within the Republican Party wasted no time in presenting their vision for America in a post-Cold War world. In March of 1992 a document coauthored by the U.S. Undersecretary for Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz and his assistant Lewis “Scooter” Libby was leaked to the press. The document called for the preservation of the United States as the only superpower in the world. Furthermore, it called for the disregard of collective action in foreign policy and claimed that the U.S. might need to take preemptive action to “prevent the development or use of weapons of mass destruction.” Such preventative action included “pre-empting an impending attack with nuclear, chemical or biological weapons”. Wolfowitz would go on to become the Deputy Secretary of Defense under President George W. Bush and his vision of a hegemonic United States would become the basis for the Bush Doctrine – known for its characterization of war between an enlightened West and radicals who desire to destroy the United States.<sup>52</sup>

Wolfowitz was not alone in promoting intervention into various regions throughout the world in order to secure the United States’ interests. During the 1990s, other leading conservative intellectuals holding similar beliefs to Wolfowitz began to call for the removal of Saddam Hussein from Iraq. Many of these intellectuals and government officials were part of an emerging neoconservative element of the Republican Party that decried leaving Hussein in place after the first Gulf War. *The Weekly Standard* on November 16, 1998 – exactly a month before Operation Desert Fox was to be carried out – published a piece that called for the U.S. to “complete the unfinished business of the 1991 Gulf War and get rid of Saddam.”<sup>53</sup> The article also claimed without inspectors in Iraq Hussein was just months from acquiring weapons of mass destruction and missiles that could reach

---

52 Patrick J. Buchanan, *Where the Right Went Wrong* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), 42-44.; Patrick E Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring no Rivals Develop” *New York Times*. March 08, 1992.

53 Operation Desert Fox was a four day strategic bombing campaign conducted by the U.S. under President Clinton against Iraq. At the time many conservatives criticized the campaign for not doing enough but there is now evidence that the operation was successful at disrupting the Hussein Regime and did significantly weaken Iraq.

Israel. The piece concluded “that the world will never be safe, and U.S. interests and allies will never be secure, so long as Saddam is in charge in Baghdad.”<sup>54</sup>

The neoconservative founder and editor of *The Weekly Standard* William Kristol used his publication throughout 1998 to call for U.S. intervention in Iraq. Furthermore, Kristol, along with Robert Kagan – another neoconservative – formed Project for a New American Century (PNAC). The think tank asserts that the U.S. must have “a military that is strong and ready to meet both present and future challenges; a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad; and national leadership that accepts the United States’ global responsibilities.”<sup>55</sup>

With the success of Operation Desert Fox unclear, neoconservatives continued to push for the removal of Saddam Hussein. Iraq was closed off from the West and the inability to confirm or deny reports of Hussein’s nuclear, biological, and chemical buildup made some uneasy. The neoconservatives continued to call for military action in Iraq. As the Clinton Administration was entering its final year, Gary Schmitt (the president of PNAC) wrote an article for *The Weekly Standard* that praised the work of Laurie Mylorie, a member of the American Enterprise Institute. The article reviewed her book *Study of Revenge: Saddam Hussein’s Unfinished War against America*. In the book, Mylorie claimed that Hussein had played a role in coordinating the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.<sup>56</sup> Accepting this as truth, Schmitt turned the argument against the Clinton administration claiming that they did not investigate the links between the terrorists and Baghdad because they feared being forced into a conflict. Schmitt concluded that “for Saddam Hussein, the Gulf War never ended.” He continued to say that “coming to terms with that fact would require the American government to take steps to remove him and his regime from power.” Neoconservatives, including PNAC, would challenge the Clinton administration on Iraq and would be a political force in the Bush White House.<sup>57</sup>

54 ‘How to Attack Iraq’ (16 November 1998) 4 *The Weekly Standard*.

55 Project for a New American Century, *Statement of Principles* <<http://www.rrojasdatabank.info/pfpc/PNAC---statement%20of%20principles.pdf>>.

56 After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, documents were obtained that demonstrated that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with the attack on the World Trade Center in 1993. Indeed, Hussein had imprisoned the terrorist that Mylorie claimed to be an agent of the Iraqi dictator. Eli Lake, ‘Report Details Saddam’s Terrorist Ties’ *The New York Sun*, 14 March 2008.

57 Gary Schmitt, ‘State of Terror: War by Any Other Name’ (20 November 2000) 6 *The Weekly Standard* 34.

While President Bush enjoyed the support of a wide range of small government advocates upon taking office, over twenty members or signatories of PNAC held positions in his administration. Among the most prominent of these were Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, John Bolton, Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz. Despite the heavy presence of neoconservatives in the administration, President Bush was initially satisfied with pursuing his predecessor's policy in Iraq. This course of action should come as no surprise. After all, Bush had run a campaign based almost entirely on domestic concerns. In the first months of his presidency, President Bush outlined his position concerning Iraq: "We will continue to enforce the no-fly zones. The no-fly zones are enforced on a daily basis. It is part of a strategy, and until that strategy is changed, if it is changed at all, we will continue to enforce the no-fly zone."<sup>58</sup>

President Bush's support of the status-quo in America's relations with Iraq gained him little support within conservative ranks. The neoconservatives continued to make the case against Hussein while, libertarians – hoping that a new administration would bring a new policy – called for a rethinking of the Iraqi containment. Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, published an article in *The Freeman* in June 2001 that demanded an end to the United States' failed policy in Iraq. Bandow called for an end to the no-fly zone, for an end to sanctions in exchange for inspections and an import-control regime that would limit Iraq's capabilities to manufacture weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, Bandow suggested that the U.S. should quit spending money and "outwait a much weakened Iraq" and that the U.S. should expect its allies in the region to build up their own militaries to contain Hussein. Bandow's libertarian perspective, with its emphasis on diplomacy, trade, and limited military engagement, contrasts sharply with what PNAC and members of the Bush Administration had in mind.<sup>59</sup>

The likelihood of the U.S. reversing its policy towards Iraq in a manner that would have satisfied Bandow was highly unlikely. Three months later, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 such ideas would have appeared fanciful and potentially dangerous. After 9/11 the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was determined to ensure that America was ready to meet any threat. At 2:40 on the afternoon of September 11, after some intelligence linking Osama bin Laden to the attacks reached Rumsfeld, the secretary ordered that the military work on strike plans. Rumsfeld continued in the same breath to say: "Judge

---

58 Quoted in Doug Bandow, 'Bombing Without End: It's Time to Transform U.S. Policy towards Iraq' (June 2001) 51 *The Freeman*.

59 Ibid.

whether [the intelligence is] good enough to hit S. H. at the same time. Not only UBL.” Rumsfeld’s comments about Hussein – just hours after the Pentagon was attacked – indicate how large of a threat the neoconservatives within the Bush Administration perceived Hussein to be.<sup>60</sup>

After 9/11, PNAC wasted no time writing President Bush to guarantee him the group’s support. Their letter dated September 20, 2001 outlined the critical fronts on the war on terror. Osama bin Laden received two sentences, while Iraq received three times the amount of ink. According to PNAC, “even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq.” The letter argued that “failure to undertake such an effort will constitute an early and perhaps decisive surrender in the war on international terrorism.” President Bush, whose administration was filled with individuals who held similar sentiments towards Iraq, was forced to take the threat of Hussein seriously.<sup>61</sup>

President Bush confirmed his administration’s commitment to fighting potential threats to America’s security in his 2002 State of the Union speech. Bush argued that a new ‘Axis of Evil’ threatened the United States. North Korea, Iran, and Iraq posed a particularly daunting threat. Bush spoke about North Korea and Iran briefly but focused his attention on Iraq. According to Bush, Iraq was supporting terrorists. Furthermore, Hussein desired to develop anthrax, nerve gas and nuclear weapons. Bush cited the crimes that Hussein had committed against his own citizens “leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children”. Bush condemned Iraq’s refusal to allow international inspectors into the country and declared that Iraq “has something to hide from the civilized world”.<sup>62</sup> After this speech, it was clear that the Bush administration intended to take military action – unilaterally if necessary – to remove Hussein.

In January 2003, *Reason Magazine* published an article entitled ‘Should We Invade Iraq?’ The article pitted a libertarian writer, John Mueller, against a neoconservative, Brink Lindsey. Lindsey, the Cato Institute’s Vice President of Research, argued for intervention in Iraq while Mueller argued against the war. Mueller opened the article by outlining the weakness of Hussein’s military and

60 Joel Roberts, ‘Plans for Iraq Attack Began on 9/11’, *CBSnews.com*, 10 September 2009 <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/plans-for-iraq-attack-began-on-9-11/>>

61 Letter from PNAC to President George W. Bush, 20 September 2001 <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/NAC304A.html>>.

62 George W. Bush, *State of the Union Address* (2002) <<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/stateoftheunion2002.htm>>

the weakness of his regime. Mueller argued that any conflict with the West would undermine Hussein's control over the nation and thus it was unlikely that Hussein would attack the United States. Furthermore, Mueller pointed out that Hussein's military was weak and unable to strike the U.S. even if Hussein was irrational and intended to attack. Mueller conceded however that an argument for war in Iraq based on humanitarian principles might have some traction. But the calls for war in Iraq were not humanitarian in nature. According to Mueller, the calls for war "raise alarms about vague, imagined international threats that, however improbable, could conceivably emanate from a miserable and pathetic regime".<sup>63</sup>

Lindsey countered Mueller's claim that war with Iraq was unjustified. Lindsey claimed that Hussein had pursued weapons of mass destruction for years and that Hussein had attempted to strike the U.S. on multiple occasions. Lindsey, challenging Mueller's skepticism of the urgent need to go to war in Iraq, claimed that Iraq would be another North Korea with respect to weapons of mass destruction if the U.S. did not act quickly and decisively. Lindsey declared that it was critical that the U.S. remove Hussein especially in light of 9/11. According to Lindsey Americans had few options, "either we crush radical Islamism's global jihad, or thousands, even millions, more Americans will die." Lindsey claimed that Iraq might arm al Qaeda and that war was necessary to preservation of American security.

The *Reason* article demonstrates the divide between conservative intellectuals. Lindsey's views reflect the neoconservative position while Mueller's view represents the traditional view of most libertarians and most Republicans prior to the Cold War.<sup>64</sup> Neither writer, however, touched on the cost of the war in Iraq or the potential consequences the war would have for Americans' civil liberties. These two reasons for opposing the war in Iraq were at the center of libertarian opposition.

Economics was at the center of libertarian opposition to intervention in Iraq. Just months into the war, Congressman Ron Paul – who had voted against the *Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002* – wrote an article for antiwar.com. Paul warned that if the U.S. were to maintain its presence

---

63 Brink Lindsey and John Mueller, 'Should We Invade Iraq?' (January 2003) *Reason Magazine* <<http://reason.com/archives/2003/01/01/should-we-invade-iraq>>

64 Prior to the Cold War most Republicans were opposed to military intervention abroad. Many were even opposed to the United States getting involved in World War II. The Republican Party during the 1940s was led by Robert Taft whose brand of fiscal conservatism and noninterventionism resembles many themes in modern libertarian thought. For more on the evolution of the Republican Party's foreign policy consult Colin Dueck's *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy Since World War II* (Princeton University Press, 2010) and Murray Rothbard's *Betrayal of the American Right* (Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007).

in Iraq beyond 2004, as President Bush had indicated, “American taxpayers easily could spend one trillion dollars over the coming years”. In order to pay for the war, Paul declared that the government would have to borrow the money, raise taxes, or turn to the printing press. Paul questioned what conservative would support such options – after all many conservatives oppose higher taxes. Paul continued to demonstrate how the money already sent to Iraq was being used to build infrastructure and remake Iraqi society. Paul condemned such nation building decrying that Americans “will pay for housing, health care, social services, utilities, roads, schools, jails and food in Iraq, leaving American taxpayers with less money to provide these things for themselves at home”.<sup>65</sup> The distinction between elements in the conservative movement is sometimes blurry, but the Iraq war was beginning to more obviously isolate the libertarian members of the small government coalition that supported George W. Bush in 2000.

Early in 2004 David Kay, the chief weapons inspector of the Iraq Survey Group, quit. Kay had been placed in charge of finding Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction. In an interview, Kay said that he did not believe weapons had been mass produced since the first Gulf War.<sup>66</sup> Kay’s admission that there had been few or no weapons of mass destruction damaged President Bush’s credibility. In light of the reports that no such weapons were likely to be found, Bush found himself in a compromised position. In his autobiography, President Bush describes what the failure of finding the weapons meant: “This was a massive blow to our credibility – my credibility – that would shake the confidence of the American people”.<sup>67</sup>

The blow to the Bush Administration was also a blow to neoconservatism. Robert Kagan and William Kristol realized that support for the Iraq war was waning by early 2004. Kristol had co-authored with Lawrence Kaplan *The War Over Iraq: Saddam’s Tyranny and the American Mission*, which had explained the importance of invading Iraq and overthrowing Hussein. Kagan and Kristol joined forces in February 2004 to form a justification for the war despite the realization that Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction did not exist. *The War Over Iraq* began by explaining that while weapons of mass destruction were “a key part of the case for removing Saddam” they were not the only justification for U.S. intervention.

65 Ron Paul, ‘Your Money In Iraq’ *Antiwar.com* 30 September 2003 <<http://www.antiwar.com/paul/paul78.html>>

66 Peter L. Hahn, *Mission Accomplished?: The United States and Iraq Since World War I* (Oxford University Press, 2012) 154; BBC News, ‘US Chief Iraq Arms Expert Quits’ 24 January 2004 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3424831.stm>>; Tom Brokaw, ‘David Kay: Exclusive Interview’ NBC News, 26 January 2014 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4066462>>

67 George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (Crown, 2010) 262.

Kagan and Kristol emphasized that Hussein was aggressive, tyrannical, and defiant towards international decrees. They emphasized how Hussein brutalized his own people and declared that there was a humanitarian justification for the war.<sup>68</sup>

As the 2004 election drew closer, libertarians were left with the difficult question of who to support. With the presidential election approaching, many libertarians determined that supporting the Democrats might maximize freedom more so than voting for President Bush. Early in the Democratic primary, a libertarians-for-Howard-Dean blog site was created. Furthermore, several prominent libertarians were reported to at least be considering voting for Governor Howard Dean over Bush. Those who publically announced that they might defect from the conservative Cold War coalition were *Reason Magazine* assistant editor Julian Sanchez and Cato Institute senior fellow Gene Healy. If nothing else, such defections demonstrate a frustration with the Bush administration among influential libertarians.<sup>69</sup>

In an article for *Reason Magazine*, Jacob Sullum outlined his reasoning for voting for Dean. Sullum argued that Democratic administrations had actually resulted in more “fiscal responsibility, free trade, competitive markets and neoclassical microeconomics”. The article explained that this was in large part due to the unwillingness of Republican congresses to vote for the Democrats’ agenda, whereas those same Republicans were more than willing to vote for increased spending when requested by a Republican president. One reason to vote for Dean was to create a balance of power in Washington. Sullum claimed that a mass defection from the GOP might improve libertarians’ standing within the conservative community. When a libertarian voted for a Democrat, Sullum explained, their vote actually counted as two because they took one vote away from the Republicans and added one to the Democrats. Therefore, at least in theory, “in close elections, a willingness to coalition jump may make the libertarian swing vote enough of a prize that candidates become, at the least, afraid of alienating us too severely”.<sup>70</sup> Dean did not win the Democratic nomination in 2004. Instead, John Kerry emerged from the primary process victorious. Kerry however, did not have the same appeal to libertarians. While some libertarians did vote for Kerry over Bush, there was no concerted effort to swing libertarians to the Kerry camp.

---

68 Robert Kagan and William Kristol, ‘The Right War for the Right Reasons’ (23 February 2004) 9 *The Weekly Standard*.

69 W. James Antle III, ‘Conservative crack up: Will Libertarians Leave the Cold War Coalition?’ (17 November 2003) *The American Conservative*.

70 Jacob Sullum, ‘Attack of the Dean Leainers: The Libertarian Case for the Democrats’ (14 October 2003) *Reason Magazine*.

Libertarian support for the Republican ticket decreased considerably in 2004. In 2000, Bush won the libertarian vote by 52%. In 2004, the polls reflected libertarian frustration; Bush won the libertarian vote by just 21%. Libertarians demonstrated their animosity with Bush's policy in Iraq by either not voting or casting a ballot for Senator Kerry.<sup>71</sup> Despite a tough challenge, Bush won reelection and the war in Iraq continued. The war in Iraq languished on until 2007 when Bush increased the number of troops in the country. This tactic known as the surge is widely credited for creating relative stability in Iraq, although some libertarians such as Ivan Eland credit stability to unrelated factors.<sup>72</sup> Despite the political success of Bush in convincing large numbers of the public that the surge worked, Americans grew tired with the war and Bush's popularity was extremely low when he left office.

In the 2008 Republican primary, disgruntled libertarians found a voice in the candidacy of Ron Paul. Paul, who had criticized the war in Iraq from its inception, campaigned on the promise of bringing the troops home from Iraq. In a debate in Florida in October of 2007, Paul was booed for declaring that the U.S. should quit nation building and leave Iraq. When Paul was asked if he had left the Republican party or if the party had left him, Paul answered that the Republican Party under George W. Bush neoconservatives had abandoned the Constitution. Paul reminded the audience that Eisenhower had been elected to end the Korean War, that Nixon had won in 1968 and George W. Bush succeeded in 2000 by criticizing interventionism. Candidate Paul ended that debate with applause from the audience. His candidacy for president, however, was never a serious threat to the mainstream conservatives. Paul received only six per cent of the vote cast in primaries and twelve per cent of the vote cast in caucuses.<sup>73</sup>

In the 2012 Republican primary Congressman Paul doubled his performance from 2008, gaining almost eleven per cent of the primary vote and twenty per cent of the caucus vote. Paul found conservative crowds much more in line with his views on foreign policy in light of a growing national debt and increased economic uncertainty. Despite his efforts however, Ron Paul did not win the nomination. Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney became the party's standard bearer but Ron

---

71 David Boaz, David Kirby, and Emily Ekins, *The Libertarian Vote: Swing Voters, Tea Parties, and the Fiscally Conservative, Socially Liberal Center* (Cato Institute, 2012).

72 Ivan Eland, 'Did the Surge Work?' 28 July 2008 <<http://www.independent.org/newsroom/article.asp?id=2277>>.

73 The Republican Debate on FOX News Channel in Orlando, Florida <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Evd9MwEi5Y>>; For 2008 GOP primary election results visit <<http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=2008&elect=2>>

Paul defiantly refused to endorse the neoconservative's candidacy. On election day Gary Johnson the Libertarian candidate for president received 1.2 million votes – double the votes cast for the Libertarian candidate in 2008. While that vote total would not have made up the difference for Romney, it represents the best showing for a Libertarian candidate since 1980 and the first time ever that the Libertarian party gained over one million votes. The emergence of what some call the 'liberty movement' in the United States has demonstrated the long standing divisions on the Right. It is unclear if bridging the gap between libertarians and neoconservatives would result in electoral victories for the Republican Party but in light of the 2012 presidential election some introspection seems necessary.<sup>74</sup>

### ***Bibliography***

- '2008 GOP Primary Election Results' <<http://uselectionatlas.org/>>
- Antle III, W. James, 'Conservative crack up: Will Libertarians Leave the Cold War Coalition?' (17 November 2003) *The American Conservative*.
- Bandow, Doug 'Bombing without End: It's Time to Transform U.S. Policy towards Iraq' (June 2001) 51 *The Freeman*.
- Brokaw, Tom, 'David Kay: Exclusive Interview' NBC news <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4066462>>
- Buchanan, Patrick J. *Where the Right Went Wrong* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2004).
- Bush, George W, *Decision Points* (Crown, 2010).
- Hahn, Peter L. *Mission Accomplished?: The United States and Iraq Since World War I* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 'How to Attack Iraq' (16 Novemeber 1998) *The Weekly Standard*.
- Kagan, Robert and Kristol, William, 'The Right War for the Right Reasons' (23 February 2004) 9 *The Weekly Standard*.
- Lake, Eli, 'Report Details Saddam's Terrorist Ties', *The New York Sun*, 14 March 2008.
- Lindsey, Brink and Mueller, John 'Should We Invade Iraq?' (January 2003) *Reason Magazine* <<http://reason.com/archives/2003/01/01/should-we-invade-iraq>>
- The New American Century, *Statement of Principles* <<http://www.rrojasdatabank.info/pfpc/PNAC---statement%20of%20principles.pdf>>
- Paul, Ron 'Your Money In Iraq' *Antiwar.com*, 30 September 2003 <<http://www.antiwar.com/paul/paul78.html>>

---

74 For data on Libertarian election results in each presidential election see <<http://uselectionatlas.org>>

- George W. Bush, *State of the Union Address* <<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/stateoftheunion2002.htm>>
- Republican Debate on FOX News Channel in Orlando, Florida, 21 October 2007 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Evd9MwEi5Y>>
- Roberts, Joel 'Plans for Iraq Attack Began on 9/11', CBS News, 4 September 2002 <[http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500249\\_162-520830.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500249_162-520830.html)>
- Schmitt, Gary, 'State of Terror: War by Any Other Name' (20 November 2000) *The Weekly Standard*.
- Sullum, Jacob 'Attack of the Dean Leasers: The Libertarian Case for the Democrats' (14 October 2003) *Reason Magazine*.
- Tyler, Patrick E. 'U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring no Rivals Develop', *New York Times*. 8 March 1992.
- BBC News, 'US Chief Iraq Arms Expert Quits', 24 January 2004 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3424831.stm>>