The Neoconservatives: Liberal View, Conservative Response

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Beyond any doubt Peter Steinfels' investigation of neoconservatism raises more questions than it answers.* Equally beyond dispute, the unanswered questions are the more important and significant for an understanding of the intellectual climate and landscape of a very troubled republic. To see why this is so, as well as to do justice to Steinfels' efforts (which are not inconsiderable by any means), let us first look at the major themes and contentions which he advances. In this undertaking I will have necessarily to touch upon his mode of argumentation and the manner in which he marshals and organizes his evidence.

I

The book consists of eleven chapters that deal with essential questions regarding neoconservatism. The significance and "why" of neoconservatism, concerns which do permeate the book, are the principal topics of chapters one and two. The "what" is the concern of chapter three ("What Neoconservatives Believe"); the "how," of chapter four ("The Neoconservative Style"); the "who," chapters five, six, and seven (devoted respectively to Irving Kristol, Patrick Moynihan, and Daniel Bell); the "message" or "theory" chapters eight, nine, and ten (concerned principally with the "new class," equality, democracy, expertise and their inter-relationship); and a final chapter ("Conclusion: The War for the 'New Class'") in which, understandably enough, Steinfels summarizes and focuses upon those characteristics of neoconservatism, both substantive and procedural, emphasizing its raison d'être, overall strategy, contradictions, as well as its "virtues and vices."

Throughout his exposition Steinfels concentrates on five principles, tenets, or perceptions which he argues "convey the animating spirit of neoconservatism, its paramount concern [and] the standpoint from which it poses almost all its questions." (53) Three of these animating convictions or tenets stem from a shared perception of what is wrong with American society and, to a greater or lesser degree, with the Western world:

1. Because "a crisis of authority" has arisen in the United States and the Western world, governing institutions and ordered liberty as well as "the legacy of liberal civilization" are in grave danger. (53)

2. The cultural-social crisis which afflicts the United States is not the product of the political-economic superstructure. Rather, "The problem is that our convictions have gone slack, our morals loose, our manner corrupt." (55) Stated another way, and what is clearly disturbing to Steinfels, the neoconservatives do not point an accusing finger at either the capitalist-free enterprise system or our political institutions and processes for the malaise that has overtaken the United States and the better part of the Western world. Nor, as seems puzzling to Steinfels, do neoconservatives believe the causes of the crisis, even when it comes down to such matters as "racial conflict and the war in Vietnam," can be attributed to the "governing elites." (55) Rather, they maintain, the basic cause is the rise of an "adversary culture" that both fuels and is fueled by the "new class."

Steinfels, through no real fault of his own, has great difficulties in giving his
readers a clear idea of what neoconservatives mean when they refer to the "new class." [To appreciate the diversity of views on what this concept means see, "Is There a New Class?," 16 Society 2 (January/February, 1979) (hereafter cited as Society)]. Irving Kristol, to my knowledge, first used the term (in the context Steinfels is speaking of it) to describe what he perceived to be a political and social phenomenon in contemporary America. Though (see Society) parallels can be and have been drawn between Kristol's "new class" and Milovan Dijlas' "new class," Henry Fairlie's "establishment," James Burnham's "managers," or C. Wright Mills' "power elite," Kristol's conception differs from these by centering on the critical and inordinate role that the academic, intellectual, and communication elite now play in both shaping the boundaries and direction of public discourse on the major social and political issues confronting the nation. In my judgment, James Burnham's Suicide of the West is the best single work to consult for an understanding of the ideology of those who constitute the "new class." More precisely, Kristol's "new class" shares most of the beliefs and values of liberal ideology that manifest themselves in the symptoms that Burnham labels the "liberal syndrome."

3. Too much is being asked of government by way of curing the economic and social ills of society. "Government is," to use Steinfelds' depiction of the neoconservative position, "the victim of overload." (58) Excessive popular demands, the very outgrowth of liberal sentimentality and secular humanism (Steinfelds dubs this "good-heartedness and social sensitivity") coupled with the "demand" for equality in the broadest sense of that word (not only political and legal, but "social and economic condition"), have placed responsibilities and goals on the government which it cannot possibly hope to fulfill. (60-2) The neoconservatives, according to Steinfelds, believe that the "new class" by pressing "moral claims against the government that can neither be resisted nor met" has gone a long way toward undermining "legitimate authority." Beyond this, drawing upon the moral capital accumulated "in the civil rights and antiwar movements," the new class claims for radical equality have even rendered "established leaders defenseless." (62)

The remaining two of the five neoconservative tenets which Steinfelds sets forth relate to strategy. They can also legitimately be viewed as goals. But, whether goals or strategy, they are best understood in light of the preceding neoconservative beliefs.

4. "Authority must be reasserted and government protected." This involves strategy and tactics at three different levels, "government, the public, and the leading elites." At the governmental level, the neoconservative grand strategy is to "support government programs that would foresee, forestall, or relieve destabilizing social tensions." This means that government "should be shielded" from taking responsibility for the failures that inevitably arise from the "overloads" that are placed upon it by the new class. (64)

At the public level the strategy is to lower the expectations of the people.

For the "decision-making elites," the "real targets" of neoconservative efforts, the strategy and tactics employed are more complex. As Steinfelds would have it, they must be designed to "discredit" the policies, programs, and beliefs which emanate from the adversary culture: "the new class and its adversary culture must be tamed, under threat of being purged from responsible milieus." (65) This involves linking the new class and adversary culture with "various expressions of extremism"; e.g., associating "modernism" with "nihilism"; "poverty programs" with "looting"; "government regulation" with "totalitarianism"; "Women's liberation or homosexual rights" with "the destruction of the fam-
5. Because the neoconservatives are basically “Cold Warriors,” they emphasize the need, given the “precarious international order,” for a “stable, unified society at home” to resist the thrusts of the Soviet Union. What is more, to this same end, they are inclined to emphasize “the Third World’s rejection of liberal values.” (67) In this connection, Steinfelds writes: “Neoconservatives are shrewd students of social dynamics who know well the interaction of foreign and domestic policies. Their renewed emphasis on foreign affairs emerged after the New Left and the ‘counterculture’ had dissolved as convincing foils for neoconservatism, and just after Watergate proved an embarrassment. Their determination to find an overseas opponent, whether Idi Amin, Fabian socialism, Eurocommunism, or Soviet power, seemed constant despite the vast differences in the military and geopolitical factors.” (68-9)

These, as I see it, represent the major substantive points of Steinfelds presentation with respect to neoconservatism, its doctrines and exponents. I will, however, have occasion in my critique to deal with other aspects of neoconservatism which Steinfelds does emphasize at various points.

II

STEINFELDS’ analysis of neoconservatism reveals more about the current state of American liberalism than it does about neoconservatism. Specifically, he gives every indication of suffering from a myopia peculiar to mainstream American liberals but which is most pronounced among the religious Left. For instance, because he cannot comprehend the ‘linkages’ which some neoconservatives want to forge between, say, “Women’s liberation or homosexual rights and the destruction of the family” (65), we can rest assured that he is incapable of perceiving any relationship between a growing per- missiveness and the decline or rejection of values central to that order and civility we still enjoy in the Western world. However, rather than simply confessing that he looks at the world through a different set of glasses than the neoconservatives, glasses which will not allow him to perceive any such relationships, Steinfelds argues that such relationships do not exist; that they are, more or less, merely the outgrowth of a half-baked ideology. The neoconservatives, he solemnly informs us, “have gone to the same school; depend on the same secondary works; and, whether the topic be Rousseau, the French Revolution, American populism, or the Cold War, possess only the most cursory awareness, if any at all, of scholarly conclusions at odds with those they rely upon.” (73) Steinfelds, and presumably his liberal cohorts, from the depths of their profound wisdom, scholarship, and insight are far too intelligent and knowledgeable to embrace the simplistic analyses that seem to enthrall neoconservatives. The neoconservatives, if we are to believe Steinfelds, are still chained in the cave looking at the images, not reality.

In this attack upon neoconservatives, Steinfelds is, of course, only employing a standard liberal tactic that has been used with great success over the last four decades: When liberal doctrine comes under attack, be it by conservatives or the proverbial “man from Missouri” who merely expresses a healthy skepticism, the intellectual credibility of the assailant must be brought into question. This discreditation process is normally accomplished by the use of techniques that belie the liberals’ “cross my heart and hope to die” commitment to the “open” society a la Mill and Popper. Recourse, they argue, must be had to the “experts,” the “recognized” authorities in the field, whether the issue be when human life begins, the role of the Supreme Court, or the ratification of SALT II. Naturally, because liberals dominate the Academy where these experts and authorities are presumed to re-
side, the whole process is somewhat circular. If, perchance, there are academic dissenters from the liberal line, they are to be regarded as "out of step," "behind the times," "lacking adequate credentials," "exhibiting inadequate scholarship," or, *inter alia*, eccentrics of one kind or another who do not enjoy the "respect" of their professional peers.

If this seems to be too strong an indictment of liberal tactics, consider the following quotations from Steinfels' work which could be multiplied many times over.

On Kristol: "As a conveyor of political analysis, Kristol occasionally makes a good argument against current assumptions; more often he is careless about facts and inattentive to complexities." (106, my emphasis) On Moynihan, Steinfels is even harder: "In political philosophy as well as history, Moynihan is . . . limited in his scholarship—and knowing in his attitude. His 1976 essay for Nelson Rockefeller's Commission on Critical Choices shuffles categories like the 'utilitarian ethic' and the 'Freudian ethic' in a manner that may impress a Rockefeller but depress anyone familiar with the doctrines those terms refer to. The authorities Moynihan relies upon in many of these writings are those already congenial to his viewpoint; seldom does he confront, except by way of caricature, a serious opponent." (142, my emphasis) On Moynihan again: he "has been taken to task more frequently for his scholarship than for his prose. In fact the same reality is at the root of the confusion—Moynihan's scholarship is that of the professorial politician. Thus he intersperses his arguments with bits of poetry and references to philosophers and cultural critics—as it happens, the same bits, the same references, used again and again. They are less the mark of the scholar's deep reading than the skillful essayist's literary conceits or even the politician's rhetorical embellishment." (141) Though the treatment of Bell is more gentle, there are still instances of deprecation: "In some respects, Bell's penchant for generalization has not served him well. It is not simply that these works have been the poles of controversy. But they have been debated more as notable artifacts of passing cultural phases than as permanent contributions to social thought." (162)

At other points the attack along these lines is even more severe. We are told that "Neoconservatism evinces little awareness of the complexity of 'complexity' itself" [whatever that may mean]; that it serves as a "front," so to speak, for those who want to avoid "ethical challenges" or would prefer government by "competent' elites." For neoconservatives, Steinfels informs us, "Reference to historical ironies, or latent purposes, or unintended consequences can become mental tics, mechanical exhibitions of cleverness." A "close inspection" of neoconservatism, Steinfels writes, will reveal far less "intellectual breadth and depth" than one might assume at first glance. (73) In this vein, he tells us once again that Moynihan seems addicted to "repeating the same literary allusions" in making his case; that the vast learning of "Daniel Bell is real enough, though unfortunately displayed with all the subtlety of Mussolini's architecture"; and that Peter Drucker's "latest pronouncements [on "Pension Fund 'Socialism' '"] are shot through with the most elementary and egregious misstatements of economic and demographic fact." What is more, so the indictment continues, "The reader who is not himself devoted to thick tomes of academic philosophy may have little idea that the neoconservative depiction of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* as an expression of radical egalitarianism is wild caricature." (74)

To Steinfels' charges and tactics at least three points should be made.

(a) *Steinfels is clearly guilty of the very glibness, misrepresentation, and distortion he attributes to the neoconservatives.*

Let me illustrate this by taking just one
example: As I have just noted, Steinfels is upset with the neoconservative depiction of Rawls' theory of justice as radically egalitarian. Such a characterization he labels as "wild caricature." Judging from Steinfels' more extended discussion of the so-called distortions of Rawls' work (235-40), Robert Nisbet would certainly seem to be the chief culprit. Nisbet wrote a review article of Rawls' book in the *Public Interest* (June, 1974) wherein he did argue, as Steinfels notes, that Rawls can legitimately be compared with "Rousseau and the eighteenth century philosophes inhabiting Parisian salons" (an environment which, Steinfels gratuitously adds, represents "the consummate case of wickedness in Nisbet's mental world"). He then goes on to write: "To this thoroughly inept parallel, he [Nisbet] added an almost willful misreading of Rawls' argument." While we are left to ponder what an "almost willful misreading" constitutes, Steinfels proceeds to argue that certain neoconservatives, Nisbet presumably chief among them, "take from Rawls not Rawls' theory in its complexity but what they assume that liberal egalitarians will make of him." What is more, he argues, these same neoconservatives ignore "Rawls' insistence . . . on the priority of liberty . . . perhaps because it would be inconvenient to discover such sentiments in the egalitarian enemy." (235)

How valid are Steinfels' charges against Nisbet? For openers we should note that Nisbet is very much aware of Rawls' "priority of liberty" principle. He quotes it verbatim from the text and then summarizes its import; to wit, "the principle of liberty is made prior to all else, even equality." (Nisbet, 114)

Now it is true that Nisbet believes this to be only an "ostensible" commitment. A good deal of his article is devoted to showing why he believes this to be the case. "A second reading" of Rawls' liberty principle, he writes, indicates that it is "not so much liberty that Rawls has in mind . . . as equal shares in a vast, homogenized structure called liberty." In his judgment, "The book is consecrated to as radical a form of egalitarianism as may be found anywhere outside the pages of the *Social Contract*. Liberty, yes, but liberty carefully defined as a monolithic, total, practically identical experience for the entire population; something in which, by definition, people have equal shares—or else it does not exist." (Nisbet, 114) For Nisbet this equal share conception of liberty is foreign to those that acknowledge and emphasize the need for a sphere of liberty that relates "to the pragmatic capacity of individuals and groups to express their essence, to fulfill chosen objectives, *to initiate, to create, and to do*—in which the thought of shares is plainly absurd." More: "It is, on the historical record, the kind of liberty that is not divisible into equal shares, that is always found in very unequal proportions in which initiative, creativity, and motivation are to be found, that has proved troubling to despot and the bureaucracies they administer." (Nisbet, 117)

If we consider only Rawls' general conception of justice (an equal division of all "social primary goods—liberty, opportunity and the bases of self-respect," save as an unequal distribution will operate "to the advantage of the least favored"), Nisbet's position is thoroughly tenable. Certainly Nisbet is not guilty of an "almost willful misreading" or "wild caricature." Indeed, his appraisal of the work conforms with that of other serious scholars. Professor Allan Bloom, for example, writes: "It [Rawls', *A Theory of Justice*] is the most ambitious political project undertaken by a member of the school currently dominant in academic philosophy; and it offers not only a defense of, but also a new foundation for, a radical egalitarian interpretation of liberal democracy." (b) *It is highly doubtful that liberals of Steinfels' persuasion, despite their protestations to the contrary, do seek honest dialogue with their opposition.*
Such a conclusion should come as no surprise to those familiar with the tactics of mainstream American liberalism. We need only recall that the "liberal" censors strove valiantly to prevent publication of Hayek's _The Road to Serfdom_, and that, when it was finally published, the liberal reviewers, to quote Hayek, "seem to have rejected it out of hand as a malicious and disingenuous attack on their finest ideals; they appear never to have paused to examine its argument. The language used and the emotion shown in some of the more adverse criticism the book received were indeed rather extraordinary."3

Steinfels is essentially no different than Hayek's liberal critics, though he is perhaps a bit more devious. Consider only the very last paragraph of the book. He begins by noting that the neoconservative movement originated as a "reaction" to the excesses of the sixties, more or less "as an antibody on the left." But even after these excesses "had been quelled," even after a return to relative normalcy within the body politic, the neoconservatives have refused to return to the fold of liberalism. "Neoconservatism," he seems to lament, "is now an independent force." But, as an "antibody," he reminds us by recurring to the "biological analogy," neoconservatism can "overreact" and "destroy the organism" [i.e., "mainstream liberalism"]. He spells all this out in some detail: "The great danger posed by and to neoconservatism is that it will become nothing more than the legitimating and lubricating ideology of an oligarchic America where essential decisions are made by corporate elites, where great inequalities are rationalized by straitened circumstances and a system of meritocratic hierarchy, and where democracy becomes an occasional, ritualistic gesture." He ends on an upbeat note: "Whether neoconservatism will end by playing this sinister and unhappy role, or whether it will end as a permanent, creative, and constructive element in American politics, is only partially in the hands of the neoconservatives themselves. It will also be determined by the vigor, intelligence, and dedication of their critics and opponents." (294)

This rhetoric is hardly calculated to coax the neoconservatives back onto the straight and narrow path of decency and morality marked out by American liberals. In fact, it can only have the opposite effect.

This is not the only evidence that can be produced to show that Steinfels is shedding crocodile tears over what he alleges to be a lack of dialogue between the so-called mainstream liberals and neoconservatives. We cannot help but note his Drew Pearson-Jack Anderson approach: the use of innuendo, questionable speculation, half truth, and the like in depicting neoconservatives. Moynihan, it would seem, is almost beyond redemption because he leads the press to believe that he spent, in Steinfels' words, "a poverty stricken boyhood in New York's Hell's Kitchen." (112)

With Kristol, matters are far graver. The most important of these from Steinfels' perspective revolve around Kristol's association with _Encounter_, an avowedly anti-communist periodical which Kristol either coedited or edited during the fifties. The issue for Steinfels is simply whether Kristol did or did not know of the covert CIA funding of _Encounter_, as if to suggest that if he did, he somehow betrayed all principles of intellectual honesty and integrity. After some agonizing over this matter, Steinfels concludes: "There is no decisive proof one way or the other, and Kristol's problem should be appreciated: How can he prove a negative, that he was not in the know about the CIA?" To this he sees fit to add, "It seems a mite naive simply to take Kristol at his word." (87)

In another context, we are led to believe that Nixon somehow did "bribe" Kristol. Although Kristol was an early Humphrey supporter in 1968, according to Steinfels he found Nixon's "election
... less depressing ... than the prospect. ... Within two years he was having dinner with Nixon in the White House.” And Steinfels, in his best Pearson-Anderson form, notes, “A month after their meeting, a front-page story in The New York Times announced ‘U.S. to Tighten Surveillance of Radicals.’” What is more, “Two days after this story in the Times, Vice-President Agnew was praising Kristol’s no-nonsense views on higher education.” (88)

We need not speculate overly long about why Steinfels draws such tenuous linkages in a way as to make Kristol a moving force behind these policies or attitudes of the Nixon administration. Certainly he does not intend the reader to look dispassionately upon either Kristol or his thoughts. But the upshot is this: neoconservatives such as Kristol can never rejoin the liberal “family.” And it is, by and large, liberals of Steinfels’ persuasion who are responsible for this. Their rhetoric, tactics, strategy, the very way they form the issues and pose the differences with their opposition, preclude meaningful dialogue, much less close affiliation.

(c) Steinfels’ book clearly shows that nothing is lost in this breakdown of dialogue between mainstream American liberals and neoconservatives.

Certainly, as Steinfels would be the first to contend, hard core American liberals will learn little from the neoconservatives, this largely because, as Steinfels would have it, neoconservatives cannot comprehend the complexities of the world or our society. If anything, neoconservatives are only apologists for the existing order.

It is equally obvious that neoconservatives will learn little from the liberals, if we take Steinfels as our model. We have already seen this with respect to an important intellectual controversy surrounding the meaning and import of Rawls’ work. But there are other examples of similar nature, particularly in

chapters eight through ten. The Ladd-Lipset portrayal of the ideological character and temperament of the academic community that would suggest it might be a principal spawning ground for the “adversary culture” and a nesting place for members of the “new class” is plainly wrong according to Steinfels.4 If we read the data presented by Ladd and Lipset from another perspective, ignoring “political differences between disciplines and between the more or less prestigious faculty,” we come to see, writes Steinfels, that academics constitute only a “very loyal opposition” to prevailing norms and beliefs—an opposition truly moderate in its beliefs and attitudes. (208)

In other words, it is really Ladd and Lipset who would come to realize that they do not know whereof they speak, if only they would read their own work.

The fact is that Ladd and Lipset do interpret their data correctly. What Steinfels has done—and this is further evidence to me that he is not interested in honest dialogue—is to ignore the critical stipulations, qualifications, and refinements in the Ladd-Lipset work. In summarizing the findings of their work, Lipset emphasizes: “most liberal academics are in the most prestigious and politically influential positions. Specifically, left-wing views, actions, and voting behavior are most prevalent among the more productive professors at the most prestigious universities, among those at the center of the research-graduate training establishment, and among social scientists, whose academic concerns are often directly relevant to key issues of public policy.” (Society 33, my emphasis) (See my text immediately above with regard to Steinfels’ stipulations. (208))

In chapter ten (“Democracy and Expertise”), Steinfels takes the neoconservatives to task for their elitism, that is, their belief in “government by an elite of experts.” (268) He writes at the beginning of the chapter that “For the neoconservatives, democracy does not seem to mean...
much more than the Founding Fathers meant by a republic: a government deriving its powers ultimately from the consent of the people but exercising them through delegated representatives, operating within a constitutional framework that preserves the kind of liberties enumerated in the Bill of Rights.” He continues: “Yet democracy in this sense, could coexist with a limited franchise, deference to aristocracy, extreme class differences, infrequent elections, and—most important for the modern situation—a passive citizenry marked by a low level of political consciousness.” (250)

Steinfels acknowledges that his reference point for understanding the Founding Fathers’ conception of democracy is Madison’s definition of republic found in Federalist essay number thirty-nine. (Note for 250 at p. 318) Let us recur, then, to the source of neoconservative thought on this matter, Federalist 39, to see what we do find by way of definition. Madison writes that “we may define a republic to be... a government which derives all its powers directly or indirectly from the great body of the people, and is administered by persons holding their offices during pleasure for a limited period, or during good behavior.” So far, we may say, Steinfels’ account of Madison’s definition of republic, which is presumably the equivalent of the neoconservatives’ definition of democracy, is without serious distortion. However distortions do arise when we read on to see what qualifications Madison appended to his definition. “It is essential,” he writes, “to such a government [republic] that it be derived from the great body of the society, not from an inconsiderable proportion or favored class of it. . . . It is sufficient for such a government that the persons administering it be appointed, either directly or indirectly, by the people.” (241, emphasis his)

What is more, matters such as frequency of elections, as Steinfels must surely know, are discussed elsewhere in The Federalist in light of the requirements of popular control of government. Essay 53 by Madison remains one of the finest expositions we have on considerations that should determine term of office in the republican form. Most certainly, as Federalist 57 makes clear, Madison’s conception of republicanism was far from elitist, as that term is normally understood. He asks, “Who are to be the electors of the federal representatives?” He answers: “Not the rich, more than the poor; not the learned, more than the ignorant; not the haughty heirs of distinguished names, more than the humble sons of obscure and unpropitious fortune. The electors are to be the great body of the people of the United States.” In the same fashion he inquires “Who are to be the objects of popular choice?” Answer: “Every citizen whose merit may recommend him to the esteem and confidence of his country. No qualification of wealth, of birth, of religious faith, or of civil profession is permitted to fetter the judgment or disappoint the inclinations of the people.” (351)

I do not mean to hold Steinfels to account for a comprehensive understanding of the theory of self-government set forth in The Federalist. But a fuller understanding of this theory is clearly necessary if he is to appreciate the concerns of at least certain neoconservatives, concerns about a national presidential primary, direct popular election of the President over to the feasibility and desirability of direct or plebiscitary democracy. Stated boldly, he cannot come to grips with their concerns until he comes to understand their conception of democracy. And one sensible point of departure to this end, I would suggest, is an honest reading of The Federalist.

My more general point would be this: The closer certain neoconservatives seem to come in hitting a weak point in the ideological structure of mainstream liberalism, the less likely they are to receive a reasoned response. In the immediate
case we should not be surprised to find a distortion of Madison's conception of republicanism simply because it stands as a more sensible and viable alternative to the plebiscitary scheme of democracy long embraced and advocated by the American liberal. When Rawls' book, the locus classicus of American liberalism, is justifiably attacked for its mindless and extreme egalitarianism, the defense of the book—for defended it must be—is to impugn the intellectual integrity of its critics. If Ladd and Lipset raise questions about the leftward ideological slant of academicians, this, too, must be "answered" because of the critical role the Academy plays as a certifier and bestower of legitimacy. And what do we find by way of an answer? A simple denial of reality; that is, the views found in the Academy pretty much reflect those found in the more general society.

At the end of the introductory chapter Steinfelds wonders aloud whether he is taking the neoconservatives "so seriously" because of "the very seriousness with which they obviously take themselves." Should he take them so seriously? He answers by quoting from Henry V: "In cases of defense 'tis best to weigh / The enemy more mighty than he seems." This, above all, is precisely what Steinfelds has not done.

III

So far I have used the term neoconservative as if it did identify a group of individuals with fairly similar beliefs. Steinfelds' title would certainly seem to suggest that this is the case and he does use the terms neoconservative and neconservatism in this sense at various places in the book. For instance, in the "Introduction" he goes so far as to write, "Neoconservatism has become outrightly protective of business interests." (10) But, as he progresses, he backs off the conception of neconservatism as a unified force. A few pages later, he speaks of it as a "political tendency." True enough, neconservative...
paleoconservatives. In other words, if we were to poll the intelligent readers of, say, *National Review* who are sympathetic with its editorial policies, they would probably agree with every tenet or concern that Steinfels or Kristol sets forth; e.g., there is a Communist threat that can only be met by a resolve that requires a high degree of national unity; there are definite limits to the powers of government to remake society; and, *inter alia*, the moral foundations of Western civilization are under attack both from within and without. To be sure, an intelligent paleoconservative may find the terms “adversary culture” and “new class” somewhat foreign. But after a brief explanation of their meaning he would understand well enough what these terms refer to. In fact, he probably has identified, albeit in different terms, the components of the “new class” as well as the so-called neoconservatives and better than Steinfels.

While Steinfels has not presented the reader with the distinguishing characteristics, position, tenets, or principles of neoconservatism, he has pointed to the major issues which do divide conservatives (neo or not) from liberals. And, in so doing, he has (unwittingly, I think) stationed the American liberals right where they belong: namely, they do not perceive a communist threat to the Western world and the values it stands for; they do not believe, even after the grossest excesses, that there is any crisis of authority in this country or Western Europe; but, yes, they do believe in the powers of a highly centralized government (= bureaucracy) to accomplish unlimited good, if only freed from the shackles attendant to deliberative self-government that the Founders fused into our system.

The fact is that Steinfels flounders badly on the matter of definition. When he specifies individuals whom he regards as neoconservative (see, for example, pp. 5 and 11), we find a disparate group of scholars and intellectuals, the vast majority of whom are, in essence, maintaining now what they maintained well before the term “neoconservative” came into vogue. Therefore, it is difficult to conceive of neoconservatism as a new movement with a “remarkably unified thrust” in the sense Steinfels contends.

IV

By way of concluding I begin with Steinfels’ explanation of neoconservatism; why it is this “movement” began in the first place. From this I will proceed to other points relevant to Steinfels’ thesis, if, indeed, it can be properly labeled such.

In his last chapter, Steinfels canvasses five theories or explanations for neoconservatism. The first of these, which he does for the most part reject, is the “We-Remained-Faithful” argument that is often advanced by neoconservatives; or, as he puts it, “Neoconservatism is nothing but the continuation of liberalism, slightly adjusted to changing circumstances.” (273) From the viewpoint of neoconservatives, the self-proclaimed liberals have deserted the ship.

This argument will not do, according to Steinfels, because it “avoids too much” and simply “shifts the need for explanation elsewhere.” It avoids answering why after “America ‘cooled,’” after the “counterculture” had been “tamed,” after Nixon had been elected President, “the neoconservatives continued training their fire on the Left,” continued “raking over” federal poverty programs, “environmental protection,” “equal rights.” Nor can it hope to explain why they suddenly discovered the virtues of the market economy and the “need for national self-assertion,” while abandoning the “traditional liberal concerns about concentrations of economic power.” (274)

Steinfels also offers a “Return-of-the-Repressed” theory which holds that neoconservatism is the revolt of long standing feuds in liberal quarters that are, in part, personal. Though he does
present another first-rate Pearson-Anderson account that would suggest personal animosity thesis might have some merit (47-8), he believes such an explanation ignores “half a dozen discordant facts” and “belie a rather desperate wish to deflect its [neoconservatism’s] impact.” (276)

Next, Steinfels examines the "Defending Hard-Won Privilege" theory. Could the neoconservatives be just “a newly established group fiercely defending its hard-won privileges”? He does believe there is something to be said for this theory because, after all, “If the neoconservatives are more sensitive about the occupation of university buildings than of lunch counters, if neoconservatives defend meritocratic principles with a vigor they do not show (as yet) for opposing high taxes on estates, is it unreasonable to find here a protectiveness about the social ladders they themselves have climbed and found reliable?” (276-7) But this theory, by itself, he does not deem sufficient.

What follows is the “Fear of Anti-Semitism” explanation: "The fear of anti-Semitism, an anti-Semitism associated with the ‘people’ rather than elites, persists. The convulsive politics of the 1960’s may have long faded, but the threat to Israel and the shadow of quotas have taken their place.” (279)

Finally, while noting that “there is something to be learned, and also to be avoided in each of these theories,” Steinfels maintains that “the most substantial explanation of neoconservatism is the one that sees it as the ideology of a new caste of experts.” (279) He is to modify this explanation a bit in the next few pages when he presents his theory in more explicit terms: “the ideological offensive of neoconservatism [note the battlefield terminology] has two purposes. One, fairly conscious, is to bind the ‘new class’ to the institutions of liberal capitalism, thus assuring that system’s stability and survival. The second, less conscious, is to ensure the leadership of the policy professionals in the ‘new class’ and their influential position near the pinnacles of power.” (291) In sum, the neoconservatives (now notice how monolithic the movement becomes), even while deprecating the “New Class,” are still keenly aware of its strategic importance in setting the course of our society. Indeed, neoconservatism from this perspective can best be viewed as an effort to restore the “policy professionals” to the status they enjoyed before Vietnam; though with the restoration, from the neoconservatives’ point of view, care must be taken to instill in these professionals the proper values and perspectives.

Steinfels’ primary explanation for the emergence can only make sense if the neoconservatives represent a relatively unified force imbued with shared values and perceptions. This would include a common understanding of the sources of our contemporary problems which, in turn, would depend upon a general acceptance of certain diagnostic procedures, and, more significantly, a similar conception of the anatomy of the social-political system.

Steinfels does not show this to be the case nor can he. The glaring weakness of the book results from the fact that he cannot define neoconservatism either prescriptively or descriptively in such a way as to provide a theoretical linkage between those he identifies as neoconservatives. The very contortions he is forced to go through in chapter seven to include Daniel Bell among the leading neoconservative theoreticians is evidence enough of this.

Steinfels’ claims for this work are highly pretentious. Despite its shortcomings, however, the reader will certainly sense from its tone and the range of its concerns that there has been a significant defection from the ranks of American liberalism, a defection that, by all evidences, liberals will not accept with good graces. From my vantage point, at least
two major reasons for this defection seem obvious. The first relates to the fact that generally speaking the American liberal does not clearly perceive the magnitude and nature of the communist threat (e.g., one has only to look at the record of Senator Kennedy, the titular head of American liberalism, to see this). What is equally clear is that, to a man, those Steinfelds identifies as neoconservatives, no matter what their other differences, are staunch anti-communists, most of whom probably felt increasingly uncomfortable associating with liberals. As Steinfelds does note, this particular issue goes back to the early 50’s for some of the defectors. To a great degree this same kind of division is manifesting itself within the Democratic party which, through so-called “reforms,” is precariously close to falling under the domination of an extreme Left that is more or less oblivious to the menace of international communism.

The second reason is related to the first. Self-criticism or self-appraisal (“internal criticism,” as Steinfelds would have it) is hardly the strong suit of American liberals. Steinfelds’ book is ample testimony to this effect. We never find serious considerations accorded the very likely hypothesis that the weakness and obvious imperfections of liberal theory might be a basic reason for the defection; that liberal are too rigid, inflexible, doctrinaire, or ritualistic in both the practice of their beliefs and the pursuit of their goals to tolerate serious disagreement. Certainly this would be sufficient to account for a breakaway.


To put this otherwise, one does not have to look to unconscious motives or any grand strategy to account for the widespread defection of the intellectuals and academics from the ranks of liberalism that we have witnessed in the last decade. It could well be that many defectors who now associate with ‘conservative’ “think tanks” simply want to move and cogitate in a new environment wherein they can examine social issues, policies, and problems without being pestered to answer for their deviations from liberal ideology.

Finally, it is also clear that liberals are seriously bothered by this defection. Whereas they would seldom see fit to do battle with paleoconservatives, they do with the recent deserters whom they find far “more informed and sophisticated” than the paleoconservatives. The reason for this I would submit is only in part that many of these defectors were once fairly prominent liberals. Equally significant, at least, many of them are academics who have been or are associated with prestige universities. In other words, the defections hit liberalism precisely where it hurts the most.

God knows that the forces of anti-liberalism in this country can use all the help they can get. And there are some signs that these defections, important in their own right, may represent just the beginning of a movement away from American liberalism in the circles of higher education. To the extent this is true, Steinfelds and friends have every reason to worry.

