

The PNAC (1997–2006) and the Post-Cold War 'Neoconservative Moment'

Written by Pierre Bourgois

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The Project for the New American Century–PNAC, founded in 1997 by William Kristol and Robert Kagan, is generally considered to be a mainly neoconservative think tank. One of the major objectives for the organization, active from 1997 to 2006, was “to promote American global leadership” (PNAC 1997a). During this time, members of the PNAC were looking to develop the emerging “Neo-Reaganian” American policy. According to their “Statement of Principles” published in June 1997, pursuing such a strong interventionist and moral clarity foreign policy is the only way to guarantee the security and greatness of the United States in the 21st century (PNAC 1997b).

Throughout its years of activity, the PNAC played an essential role in the construction and consolidation of the “neoconservative network.” Sharing its offices with those of the neoconservative beacon *The Weekly Standard*, both of which were housed within the walls of the American Enterprise Institute–AEI, the PNAC managed to successfully place itself at the heart of this influential network. Even though several non-neoconservatives actively participated in the life of this think tank, these were the neoconservative ideas which were carried out and therefore put forward by this think tank, notably through its use of “a few in-depth studies and monographs in addition to the famous ‘letters’ that helped bring it to public attention” (Vaïsse 2008/2010, 231). The PNAC was looking to win “the War of Ideas” which had been raging on amongst major U.S. decision makers.

This article’s objective is to examine the role and place of this controversial neoconservative think tank. It aims to analyze the PNAC through the prism of neoconservatism, or more precisely, through the prism of the last generation of this school of thought. The PNAC seemed to clearly symbolize what is more commonly referred to as the “neoconservative moment” at the beginning of the 2000s.

The Birth of a Think Tank in the Context of Neoconservatism’s Renewal

The PNAC was founded in 1997 within a unique context for neoconservatism. Its creation came about in a post-Cold War moment where the school of thought was looking for a second wind. Neoconservatism has been generally associated with a “muscle” foreign policy brought about by George W. Bush’s administration at the beginning of the 2000s. Yet, it was more than that, as it was also a complex movement which was far from a recent development.

Neoconservatism finds its ideological origins during the 1930s on the East Coast of the United States, more specifically within the walls of the City College of New York (CCNY) (Dorman 2001). However, it was the evolution of an American left liberalism, during the second half of the 1960s, which in fact, gave birth to neoconservatism (Vaïsse 2008/2010). Former CCNY Trotskyist students such as Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell or Nathan Glazer greatly opposed the “left-hand turn” American liberalism was taking. It was during the 1960s that President Lyndon B. Johnson launched his now-famous “Great Society”. The objective here was to reduce the various inequalities within American society through several ambitious social programs. Above all, the “liberal consensus” of the post-war period seemed to collapse under the weight of the New Left’s focus on identity issues. For these intellectuals who remained

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anchored to the left, it was thus the entirety of American liberalism which seemed weakened by the movements of the 1960s. Therefore, it was primarily domestic policy which caused the first “neoconservatives” (Harrington 1973) to come together, around *The Public Interest* or *Commentary* – only from 1970 for the latter (Vaïsse 2008/2010, 7).

However, neoconservatism was going to quickly become “focused on the liberal drift in foreign policy” (*Ibid.*, 9). Faced with the *Détente* policy propagated by Washington throughout the 1970s, neoconservatives instead defended a hard-lined approach with regard to the USSR. According to them, the United States had to act in order to defend democracy across the globe. They “thought of themselves as guardians of the ‘vital center’: in favor of social progress and civil liberties at home and anticommunism abroad” (*Ibid.*, 8). Faced with the direction taken by American liberalism regarding domestic and foreign policy, a large part of the movement joined the ranks of Ronald Reagan at the start of the 1980s. These thinkers were seduced by its uncompromising approach towards the USSR and attracted by its overall appeal for international democracy. As Jacob Heilbrunn (2008, 162) observes, Reagan “himself has converted to conservatism, and it was natural that he would welcome new converts.” For neoconservatives, it was a unique opportunity to direct American foreign policy towards a hard-lined approach, fixed in large part thanks to an increased defense of democracy throughout the world.

However, the end of the Cold War brought about the end of neoconservatives’ long-time foe: the Soviet Union. The start of the 1990s thus marked an unquestionable time of doubt amongst members of this school of thought (Fukuyama 2006, 39). Debates began along post-Cold War lines, followed by debates amongst neoconservatives with some, such as Irving Kristol, privy for a return to Realism, others, such as Joshua Muravchik however, defending an America engaged in the world. Confronted by the evolution of an international context, some of the first neoconservatives announced, then and there, the end of neoconservatism (Kristol 1995, xi; Podhoretz 1996).

However, a new generation or a “third age” (Vaïsse 2008/2010) of neoconservative thinkers emerged. It brings together such personalities as, William Kristol (Irving’s son), Robert Kagan or Max Boot. Contrary to the generation which came before, these neoconservatives were no longer, for the most part, former liberal thinkers converted to conservatism, instead, they were full-fledged conservatives. They defended a “Neo-Reaganian” American foreign policy and proudly touted such themes as an American “benevolent hegemony” or *Pax Americana* (Kagan and Kristol 1996). The emergence of this new generation was clearly illustrated by the creation, in 1995, of *The Weekly Standard*, for which the primary goal was to bring the Republican Party line, and more generally speaking, that of conservatism, closer to neoconservative themes. It was precisely this generation of neoconservatives which would play an important role throughout the early 2000s and who, consequently, is of interest for this article.

Thus, the PNAC was born in a unique context. It constituted not only additional support, but was also in line with a renewal strategy for this school of thought, which had been severely in question since the end of the Cold War. In 1997, the “new neoconservatives” were bubbling in intellectual excitement and were looking for an optimal way to spread their ideas. As Maria Ryan observes: “With the establishment of PNAC, Kristol and Kagan now had a platform they could devote exclusively to promoting their foreign policy vision” (Ryan 2010, 90).

A Think Tank in the Service of Neoconservative Ideas

The PNAC quickly became a privileged organization amongst neoconservatives of the last generation. Resolutely convinced of the universal benefits of a liberal democracy, the neocons asserted themselves around the idea of promoting a “muscle” democracy, advocating a “hard” (Boot 2004b, 24) or “in boots” (Hassner 2002, 43) Wilsonianism. For these thinkers, “the current situation is reminiscent of the mid-1970s” (Kagan and Kristol 1996, 19), the period in which *Détente* was popular in Washington was also when American decision makers generally favored overall stability over the *status quo*. However, Kristol and Kagan observe that “Reagan called for an end to complacency in the face of the Soviet threat, large increases in defense spending, resistance to communist advances in the Third World, and greater moral clarity and purpose in U.S. foreign policy” (*Ibid.*). Thus: “He championed American exceptionalism when it was deeply unfashionable. Perhaps most significant, he refused to accept the limits on American power imposed by the domestic political realities that others assumed were fixed” (*Ibid.*). It was exactly this type which, according to them, was the most appropriate in an international post-Cold War world. Therefore, they advocated American “benevolent hegemony”: “The first objective of U.S. foreign policy should

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be to preserve and enhance that predominance by strengthening America's security, supporting its friends, advancing its interests, and standing up for its principles around the world" (*Ibid.*, 20).

In this respect, these ideas can clearly be seen and presented in the declaration statement of the organization (PNAC 1997b), "a new manifesto that succinctly summarized the Kristol-Kagan vision" (Ryan 2010, 88). The PNAC stems from a simple belief: "American foreign and defense policy is adrift" (PNAC 1997b). Therefore, for the signatories: "We seem to have forgotten the essential elements of the Reagan Administration's success: 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" (*Ibid.*). For the PNAC, it was a question of reaffirming American power in the post-Cold War world. Since the 1990s, America seemed, in the eyes of the rest of the world, as no longer rise to the level of "superpower," but to that of a "hyper-power" (Védrine 1999/2000, 814). For members of the PNAC, this "unipolar" (Krauthammer 1990/1991) situation provided the United States with a new role, that of "in maintaining peace and security in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East" (PNAC 1997b). Simultaneously coming on the scene during this time period was the theme of "preventative war," which would be constitutive of the Bush Doctrine at the beginning of the 2000s (*Ibid.*).

The majority of the PNAC's work was devoted to legitimizing and spreading neoconservative ideas at the end of the 20th century, as the aforementioned letter addressed in 1998 to then-President Bill Clinton attests. Those who signed wished to alert the President of the situation in Iraq. According to them, "that current American policy toward Iraq is not succeeding, and" the United States could "may soon face a threat in the Middle East more serious than any" it has known "since the end of the Cold War" (PNAC 1998a; See also PNAC 1998b). It was therefore the natural conclusion for the United States to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein, in order to help propagate democratic principles in the region and more generally, throughout the world (Kaplan and Kristol 2003). Various issues were simultaneously preoccupying the PNAC including, the conflict in the Balkans (PNAC 1998c), the situation in Asia (PNAC 1999; PNAC 2002b), defending the American military budget (PNAC 2000; PNAC 2003) and of course, the war on terrorism. In this respect, the famous PNAC letter addressed to President George W. Bush the day after 11 September 2001 (PNAC 2001) consolidated all of the major issues concerning the "last generation" of neoconservatives. To win the "War on Terror," the signatories outlined several key steps: capturing and eliminating Osama Bin Laden, overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime, targeting Hezbollah, defending Israel and forcing the Palestinian Authority to eradicate terrorism and finally, to substantially reinforce the United States defense budget.

In this way, the PNAC acted as a catalyst of different neoconservative ideas of the "last generation." Above all, the PNAC's foreign policy vision seemed to be in perfect harmony with that of George W. Bush's first term to which, as U.S. interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and above all in Iraq in 2003, attest. For its members, nothing could ever hinder the ever-steady march of American power. However, the situation in Iraq quickly became troublesome for neoconservatives.

The End of the Think Tank: Symbol of Difficulties for Neoconservatism?

If the beginning of the 2003 American intervention in Iraq symbolizes, in certain ways, the apogee of neoconservatives of the last generation, the streak of unfortunate events which followed decidedly marked its decline. Criticisms rapidly increased against neoconservatism. According to Elizabeth Drew, neoconservatives are "largely responsible" (Drew 2003) for the War in Iraq, and above all, the consequences of it. Thus, as Max Boot has observed, since the beginning of the 2000s, "a frenzy has been building about how neoconservatives supposedly have hijacked the Bush administration's foreign policy and transformed America into a unilateral monster" (Boot 2004a). Some of these critics even went so far as to denounce the idea of a "cabal" organized by members of the movement (Buchanan 2003; LaRouche 2004). Neocons attempted multiple times to defend the neoconservative school of thought against these accusations, which came from both the left and the right (Boot 2004a; Boot 2004b; Brooks 2004a; Muravchik 2003). Even if there were no such "neoconservative conspiracy" (Lieber 2003), it is clear that neoconservative ideas played an important role in the Bush Administration's foreign policy.

Within the intellectual movement, the euphoria initially felt at the beginning of the invasion quickly was replaced by doubt. Confronted by reality of the situation, neoconservatives were criticizing Donald Rumsfeld who was, according

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to them, clearly not “the defense secretary Bush should want to have for the remainder of his second term” (Kristol 2004). The majority of neocons pointed out the lack of troops sent by the American Secretary of Defense and denounced the way the American administration envisioned nation-building and Iraqi reconstruction (Brooks 2004b). Some even attempted to refute the existence of neoconservatism thereby denying any form of responsibility on behalf of this school of thought in the Iraqi failure (Heilbrunn 2008, 269). Internal tensions appeared, or at least became public. For example, when Charles Krauthammer gave his speech declaring victory in February 2004, at the AEI (Krauthammer 2004), Fukuyama, who was considered to be for a while one of the major neoconservatives, heavily criticized the speaker. For the author of the famous “End of History” thesis (Fukuyama 1989; Fukuyama 1992), Krauthammer’s speech was “strangely disconnected from reality” and “one gets the impression that the Iraq War—the archetypical application of American unipolarity—had been an unqualified success” (Fukuyama 2004, 58). According to Fukuyama (2006), the ensemble of complications and above all, the incapacity for the majority of neoconservatives of the last generation to admit to the numerous errors threatened the major points defended by neoconservatism.

The PNAC thus stopped all activity in 2006. The organization collapsed under the pressures of the contemporary difficulties faced by neoconservatives and the “aggressive” line which it defended on the international scene. However, for certain neoconservatives, the fact that the PNAC closed was not to be mistaken as a form of failure. Gary Schmitt, the former director of the PNAC declared: “When the project started, it was not intended to go forever. That is why we are shutting it down. We would have had to spend too much time raising money for it and it has already done its job” that is to say, “resurrect a Reaganite policy” (Reynolds 2006) for the United States. Indeed, the PNAC has succeeded in its objective of reorienting American foreign policy (Vaisse 2008/2010, 258). That being said, this must not mask the profound difficulties which the movement faced at the time, and if Paul Reynolds is to be believed, the PNAC as well. The goals announced in 1997 with the organization’s declaration statement, for Reynolds, “have turned into disappointment and recriminations as the crisis in Iraq has grown” the PNAC being thus was reduced at the moment “to a voice-mail box and a ghostly website. A single employee has been left to wrap things up” (Reynolds 2006).

The failure of the PNAC reflects the progressive collapse of the neocons and the ideas which they defended. This period actually marks the return to a more realist point of view within the presidency. Globally, neoconservatives no longer seemed to be riding high within American society. The Midterm elections of 2006 perfectly symbolized the rejection of neoconservative points of view. American foreign policy in the Middle-East seemed to be severely criticized. As Jacob Heilbrunn observes: “Charges of cynicism and corruption stuck to the GOP, but the Iraq war was clearly the biggest factor in stripping the Republicans of control of both houses of Congress” (Heilbrunn 2008, 269). Faced with these difficulties, there were numerous voices who, starting around the mid-2000s, declared the end of American neoconservatism (Ikenberry 2004; Dworkin 2006). The 2008 elections and the victory of Barack Obama at the expense of John McCain, viewed as being close to the neoconservative movement, greatly confirmed the neocons’ decline.

From the PNAC to the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI): Last Throes or Veritable Resurgence?

In 2009, William Kristol, Robert Kagan and Dan Senor founded the Foreign Policy Initiative–FPI, which was often compared to the PNAC (Rozen 2009). The similarities between the PNAC and this organization are indeed striking.

Firstly, its very founders, William Kristol and Robert Kagan were, as seen before, the principle founders for the PNAC in 1997. Furthermore, among leading personalities at the FPI, there was, for example, Dan Senor, a “rising star” amongst the neoconservative “young guard” at the time, Ellen Bork who, as member of the PNAC, signed several letters coming from the organization (PNAC 2002a; PNAC 2002b) and even Chris Griffin, who was most well-known for being a researcher at the closely-allied AEI.

But, beyond FPI’s leading team, it was the ideological content of this new think tank which reminded people of the PNAC. The FPI felt, as much as the PNAC, that the post-Cold War world was one far from being considered pacified. For the numerous voices who hoped, especially following the “Iraqi Fiasco,” for a progressive retreat of American military power in the world, members of the FPI were convinced of the necessity for increased American

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engagements in the world. According to its “Mission Statement”, “strategic overreach is not the problem and retrenchment is not the solution” (FPI 2009a). On the contrary: “The United States cannot afford to turn its back on its international commitments and allies—the allies that helped us defeat fascism and communism in the 20th century, and the alliances we have forged more recently, including with the newly liberated citizens of Iraq and Afghanistan” (*Ibid.*). Here, it is hard to miss the clearly neoconservative rhetoric of the PNAC. The United States had a moral obligation to maintain international peace and security. Overall, it appeared as if, in the end, nothing really changed. The FPI’s Mission Statement can be summarized around five key principles:

“continued U.S. engagement—diplomatic, economic, and military—in the world and rejection of policies that would lead us down the path to isolationism; robust support for America’s democratic allies and opposition to rogue regimes that threaten American interests; the human rights of those oppressed by their governments, and U.S. leadership in working to spread political and economic freedom; a strong military with the defense budget needed to ensure that America is ready to confront the threats of the 21st century; international economic engagement as a key element of U.S. foreign policy in this time of great economic dislocation” (*Ibid.*).

Therefore, it seems that the vision held by members of the PNAC had endured and had simply been updated in order to appear in this Post-George W. Bush think tank.

The way in which the FPI functioned was greatly similar to how its predecessor worked. The think tank organized multiple conferences and it published articles, notes and various dossiers in order to influence public debate, and above all, to position the ideological posture of the U.S. administration. Mainly, the FPI took back the PNAC’s “trade mark,” publishing letters openly addressed to major political decision-makers of the country, especially to the President of the United States, on questions such as democracy and human rights in Russia, Afghanistan, and even in Central Europe (FPI 2009b; FPI 2009c; FPI 2009d). In addition to bringing together many neoconservatives, it also allowed, as was the case for the PNAC, to attract “hawks” from all different horizons.

FPI’s members generally opposed the new configuration of American foreign policy defended by President Barack Obama, who spoke with emerging powers rather than, according to them, promoted U.S. leadership in the world. Thus, globally speaking, throughout his two terms, the 44th President of the United States disappointed neoconservatives on a large number of projects, even if the “opposition is not total” (Vaisse 2010, 11). Some ideas defended by neoconservatives remained present in the different political spheres and continued to exist in public debate throughout Obama’s presidency (*Ibid.*; Homolar-Riechmann 2009). But, generally speaking, the fact that neoconservatism and the FPI had quite a bit of difficulty in the ever-changing post-George W. Bush or “post-American” (Zakaria 2008) world to make itself heard amongst new American political decision-makers, is undeniable. The “neoconservative moment” seemed to have come and gone.

The election of Donald Trump to the American presidency in 2016 constituted another setback for the organization, as the election, and notably the slogan “America First” appeared to be the antithesis of the FPI’s vision of foreign policy. It was thus in this context that the FPI announced in 2017 that it was closing (FPI 2017). If multiple reasons can be invoked, most notably those of a financial nature (Gray 2017), no one doubts that this election of Donald Trump brought a massive blow to the post-Cold War neoconservative project.

Conclusion

The PNAC indisputably represented the post-Cold War “neoconservative moment,” and played an important role in the intellectual revival of neoconservatism during the second half of the 1990s (Dworkin 2006). Its apex coincides with that of neoconservatism in general, that is to say, the beginning of the 2000s in which the Bush Administration appeared to follow a foreign policy heavily inspired by neoconservative thought. If certain observers accurately consider the overall track record of the PNAC as generally positive, with the organization achieving its primary mission of redirecting American foreign policy, its closure nevertheless falls within the overall framework of the decline of the American neoconservatism audience and the discrediting of neoconservative thought. The PNAC therefore in one way contributed as much to the ascension as to the decline of “new generation” neoconservatism. The various disagreements between neoconservatives starting around 2004 had an incontestable impact on the

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think tank which, up until that point, had seemed to bring everyone together. Above all, the international situation had just largely discredited neoconservative ideas which the PNAC had been defending. Its closure in 2006, regardless of the reasons, therefore, must be seen through an overall decline of American neoconservatism.

In spite of considerable activity and work on certain projects, its successor, the FPI, generally failed in its attempts at repositioning American foreign policy. Thus, it never actually succeeded in being an as equal influencer, at least when it came to promoting its ideas, as its predecessor. If the post-Cold War “neoconservative moment” therefore seems finished, there is no doubt however that neoconservative ideals will continue to exist.

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