

A Factually Correct Guide for Max Boot

By Thomas E. Woods Jr

MY BOOK *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* has received far more attention than I ever expected. Once the book hit number eight on the *New York Times* bestseller list, the *Times*' editorial page condemned it without actually showing where its arguments were mistaken; several weeks later, to my surprise, the *Times* published a favorable profile of me. The controversy surrounding the book has reached at least two other continents: Brazil's *Folha de S. Paulo*, with the highest circulation of any newspaper in Latin America, published a full interview with me, as did a major Catholic newspaper in Ireland. The *Times* of London, for its part, published a more or less positive piece about the book.

Among conservatives the reception has been mostly favorable: Pat Buchanan praised the book on the "McLaughlin Group," Gary Bauer called it one of the top five books of 2004, and positive reviews appeared in such outlets as *Human Events* and this magazine. But neoconservative attacks on the book have also begun to surface, the most recent of which was by Max Boot.

Boot's review appeared in the online version of the neoconservative *Weekly Standard*. Mind you, the print version of the *Weekly Standard* had already reviewed the book favorably. Reviewer James W. Haley Jr. said that my book "is ultimately about truth" and is one that "everyone interested in American history should have in his library." "It is not surprising," he observed, "that a history guide written by a professor with an undergraduate degree from Harvard and

a doctorate from Columbia made it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list. What is surprising—refreshingly so—is that a text that challenges the liberal canon has so resonated with the American public."

Max Boot didn't find it quite so refreshing. Having seen the book (erroneously) described in the *New York Times* as "a neocon retelling" of American history, he grew curious and got a copy. Boot is right about one thing: the description of my book as neocon was simply idiotic; distinctions like neoconservative and paleoconservative are typically lost on the *Times*.

What is so revealing about Boot's critique, though, and what in fact makes his review newsworthy, is that it conclusively proves what traditional conservatives have consistently alleged: neoconservatism, at root, is merely a variety of leftism. Boot's criticism of my work, in fact, is almost identical to that of the *New York Times*.

Early on, Boot explains, *The Politically Incorrect Guide* "starts to slip from conventional history into a Bizarro world where every state has the right to disregard any piece of federal legislation it doesn't like," a position its author derives "mainly the writings of the Southern pro-slavery politician John C. Calhoun." What my book actually says is that important early Americans held the view that the states could refuse to enforce unconstitutional federal legislation and that both

extent of its own powers, the states will wind up completely eclipsed as the federal government hands down rulings in its own favor. The states had to have some corporate mechanism for resisting federal usurpations if they were not to be absorbed by the federal government.

I understand why Boot, a neoconservative nationalist, wants to avoid letting people know that it was Jefferson who came up with this "Bizarro" idea, since most Americans have an abiding respect for Jefferson and might be inclined to give his ideas a fair hearing. Boot prefers instead to attribute the idea solely to the "pro-slavery" Calhoun in order to taint it with the brush of slavery and get back to the neoconservative business of defending federal supremacy.

Professor Kevin Gutzman has shown that the principles behind nullification had in fact been germinating for 10 years, developing from ideas and positions that were taken for granted at the Virginia ratifying convention even by the Federalists, who most favored political centralization. Boot's treatment of the subject reveals not the slightest acquaintance with any of this; my active imagination has simply invented some "Bizarro world" in which these ideas were taken seriously.

Boot then writes that I am "particularly upset about the 14th Amendment (he claims it was never lawfully ratified)

BOOT'S CRITIQUE CONCLUSIVELY PROVES WHAT TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVES HAVE CONSISTENTLY ALLEGED: NEOCONSERVATISM, AT ROOT, IS MERELY A VARIETY OF LEFTISM.

North and South had recourse to this mechanism at one time or another during the 19th century. As for relying "mainly" on Calhoun, in an 11-page chapter on the subject my discussion of Calhoun amounts to half a page. My main source, in fact, is Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson's concern was this: if the federal government is allowed to have the final, authoritative word on the

because it barred former Confederates from holding political office." Read my Reconstruction chapter for yourself and consider the effort it must have taken Boot to misrepresent it this extent. My concern about the Fourteenth Amendment has nothing to do with its disqualification of former Confederates; I raise that issue in a single paragraph in order to show that a variety of reasons existed

for Southern opposition to the amendment.

The book's point about the Fourteenth Amendment is that it gave the federal government an opening through which it could trample on the states' rights of self-government. The 1990s were filled with state ballot initiatives that were imperiously overturned by federal judges on Fourteenth Amendment grounds. As for my "claim" that it was unlawfully ratified, Forrest McDonald—you know, that big extremist—in the *Georgia Journal of Southern Legal History* (Spring/Summer 1991) most recently laid out the scholarly argument for this position, which is about as iron-clad as you could ask for. Boot appears never to have heard of it.

Later in his review, Boot defends Harry Truman against my charge that in committing American troops to South Korea in 1950, he disregarded his constitutional duty to ask Congress for a declaration of war. That happens to have been the view of Sen. Robert A. Taft,

setting in that relatively minor affair.) The book's discussion of presidential war powers makes perfectly clear just how limited the Framers of the Constitution intended them to be. There is no room for debate here: I am right and Boot is spectacularly and outrageously wrong.

After finishing my book, Boot says he was curious to find out more about me. His painstaking research into my background brought up not the fairly substantial trail of scholarly publication that an impartial search might reveal, but rather simply my membership in an organization called the League of the South. Boot then launches into a caricature of the league based on a couple of cherry-picked quotations. I've addressed this issue at length in a Feb. 19 entry on the *LewRockwell.com* blog.

In this venue let me simply point out what Paul Gottfried once told me: by and large, the neocons detest Southerners and Germans. The older conservatism of Richard Weaver and Russell

warning, which led the United States into the war." Boot is actually surprised that American merchant ships, outfitted on Wilson's orders with Navy guns and staffed with Navy crews and instructed to fire upon any surfacing submarine, would be sunk by the Germans.

As for the Belgian atrocities, which I describe as "largely fabricated" (since they were), Boot also dissents. The point he misses is that although the Germans were indeed brutal in Belgium in suppressing a guerrilla uprising whose size they gravely overestimated, it was the tales of children having their hands cut off and corpses being made into margarine that outraged civilized opinion. And it was these sadistic and bizarre crimes, described in the Bryce Report, that were fabrications for propaganda purposes. When Clarence Darrow offered to pay \$1,000 (\$17,000 in today's money) to anyone who could show him a Belgian boy whose hands had been cut off by a German soldier, no one took him up on it.

Boot continues: "The real atrocity, [Woods] thinks, was Britain's naval blockade of Germany." Well, yes, as a matter of fact that is what I think. Britain's hunger blockade of Germany, which violated accepted norms of international law in more than one respect, resulted in 750,000 civilian deaths—about 150 times the number of Belgian civilians most scholars say were killed by the Germans.

Boot then proceeds to mischaracterize the Zimmerman telegram as "the document in which Germany's foreign minister offered Mexico the return of the American Southwest if it would declare war on the United States." Some might consider it relevant that the telegram began by noting that the Germans hoped to keep the U.S. neutral but that if they were unsuccessful and the United States entered the war against them, they wished to contract an alliance with Mexico.

Shortly after the Second World War, George Kennan wondered, "Today if one were offered the chance of having back again the Germany of 1913—a Germany

WHEN CLARENCE DARROW OFFERED TO PAY \$1,000 (\$17,000 IN TODAY'S MONEY) TO ANYONE WHO COULD SHOW HIM A BELGIAN BOY WHOSE HANDS HAD BEEN CUT OFF BY A GERMAN SOLDIER, NO ONE TOOK HIM UP ON IT.

who was known in his day as "Mr. Republican." (We can only imagine Boot's opinion of Taft.) I don't seem to realize, according to Boot, that "previous presidents had sent U.S. troops into battle hundreds of times without any declaration of war."

This is a classic example of neoconservative obfuscation. The examples Boot is speaking of do not involve the president deploying troops in offensive operations against foreign governments. The first time that happened was in 1900, when William McKinley sent 5,000 American troops to China to suppress the Boxer Rebellion, a revolt of Chinese nationalists connected to the Chinese government. (Historian Walter LaFeber notes that few people at the time appreciated the precedent that McKinley was

Kirk possessed a deep and abiding respect and sympathy for the Southern tradition, which they would never have treated with the contempt and disgust that it typically receives in neoconservative circles today. Neocons yield to no one in their hatred of the Confederate battle flag, and their condemnations of such traditional Southern symbols read like press releases from the Southern Poverty Law Center.

As for Germans, Boot is particularly enraged at my World War I chapter (our reviewer being one of the seven or so people who still consider American entry into that war a good idea). According to Boot, I am "sympathetic to German militarists" and I think it was "Woodrow Wilson's fault that Germany began sinking American ships without

run by conservative but relatively moderate people, no Nazis and no Communists—a vigorous Germany, full of energy and confidence, able to play a part again in the balancing-off of Russian power in Europe, in many ways it would not sound so bad.” In other words, U.S. intervention in World War I, undertaken with the best of intentions, had been an exceedingly costly mistake. My point exactly.

Boot also criticizes me for having written, shortly after Sept. 11, “the barbarism of recent American foreign policy was bound to lead to a terrorist catastrophe on American soil.” See how neoconservatism so easily degenerates into moral relativism. Is American foreign policy *ipso facto* admirable and beyond criticism simply because it is American? For that matter, why am I permitted to criticize our country’s abortion policy in no uncertain terms and be a decent citizen in good standing but not American foreign policy? Older conservatives, informed by the just-war tradition and more sensitive to the idea of absolute moral standards than to the amoralism of Machiavelli, were capable of rendering critical judgments on their own governments. Richard Weaver, for instance, condemned the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as did Felix Morley, one of the founders of *Human Events*.

Given that Boot appears to have no serious gripe with much of anything in the mainstream narrative of American history—indeed, perhaps he should write *The Politically Correct Guide to American History*—it’s not surprising that he would become so hysterical at the sight of a book that really does take issue with that narrative. Since in my judgment Max Boot embodies everything that is wrong with modern conservatism, his opposition is about the best endorsement I could have asked for. ■

Thomas E. Woods Jr., who holds a Ph.D. in history from Columbia University, is the author, most recently, of The Church and the Market: A Catholic Defense of the Free Economy.

[*The Neocon Reader*, Irwin Stelzer, ed., Grove Press, 328 pages]

The Genius of Neoconservatism

By David Gordon

IRWIN STELZER BEGINS this useful collection with a warning: it is wrong to think that all neoconservatives share a fixed set of beliefs. “There is no such thing as a neoconservative ‘movement,’ in the dictionary definition of ‘a body of persons with a common object.’” Nevertheless, he acknowledges, there is a neoconservative “tendency” or “persuasion.” Though neoconservatives differ among themselves—Charles Krauthammer, for example, views the chances of worldwide democratic revolution much more skeptically than does Joshua Muravchik—their ideas have become influential in American foreign and domestic policy.

Why is this so? Stelzer and other contributors have a simple explanation. The neoconservatives have ideas of outstanding merit. And they defend these ideas with unmatched acuity: is it any wonder, then, that President Bush and Condoleezza Rice hasten to embrace their wisdom? As Max Boot tells us, “Neocons have been relatively influential because of the strength of their arguments, not their connections.”

Given this endorsement by a thinker so eminent as Max Boot, we can hardly wait: what are these new and wonderful ideas? Let us turn first to foreign policy, since the war to make Iraq safe for democracy is principally responsible for the vast public attention now devoted to neoconservatism. Like Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*, the neoconservatives “disdain to conceal their views and aims.” They begin from an undoubted fact: America is the most powerful nation in the world. We must use this power, not only to counter any threats directed against us, but also to

act pre-emptively against even the slightest possibility of a threat from a foreign power.

We must here avoid a mistake. We must not conceive of threats in an overly narrow fashion. It is not only the possibility of a threat to America that cries out for pre-emptive action; any threat anywhere in the world may require a violent American response. William Kristol and Robert Kagan say that were America to follow the policy they desire, “It would act as if instability in important regions of the world, and the flouting of civilized rules of conduct in those regions, are threats that affect us with almost the same immediacy as if they were occurring on our doorstep.... In Europe, in Asia, and in the Middle East, the message we should be sending to potential foes is: ‘Don’t even think about it.’” In an article not reprinted here, Kristol and Kagan responded to John Quincy Adams’s claim that “America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy” with a remark of stunning brilliance: “why not?”

In particular, “rogue states,” such as Iran and Syria, might give atomic or biological weapons to terrorist groups. To counter this threat, the solution, as the neoconservatives see it, is obvious. We must overthrow the governments of these nefarious states: if we do so, we may breathe more easily, at least until the next possibility of a threat arises. Fortunately, this policy need not involve us in constant wars: it may suffice that we finance opposition groups, whose policies are more to our liking, within these states. Why start a war when a little subversion will do the trick? We can always bring out the big guns later.

As befits thinkers of acute intellect, the neoconservatives have more on offer than frightened endeavors to wipe out dangers before they become manifest. They hold before us a high ideal: America must bring the blessings of democracy to the world. To assume that some peoples are unsuited to our form of government is simply racist and condescending.