

[*They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*, Jacob Heilbrunn, Doubleday, 289 pages]

The Long Fuse to the Iraq War

By Philip Weiss

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE a title more overdue than *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*. Ever since neoconservatism's chief contribution to world betterment, the Iraq War, began losing its luster, its adherents have gone into a kind of hiding, and the media has given them cover. Former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, one or both of whom are neoconservatives, have suggested that the word is an anti-Semitic epithet. Others try to avoid it entirely: when Bill Kristol, who was definitely once a neoconservative, was hired by the *New York Times* as a columnist, the paper called him a "conservative" and said his father Irving Kristol, one of the movement's founders, was a leader of "modern conservatism."

Jacob Heilbrunn asserts that neoconservatives have so far gotten away "scot-free" with planning the greatest foreign-policy disaster since Vietnam. And so his book will call them to account. Not quite.

Heilbrunn achieves one important chore: a forthright social narrative of the neocons as a Jewish movement. Tracing ideological currents in the Jewish community from the 1940s to the 1970s, Heilbrunn, a journalist who himself flirted with neoconservatism, describes how the neocons were propelled by resentments against WASP elites—the men who had ignored the Holocaust, they felt, and "frozen out" Jews from the establishment. It would be hard to overemphasize Heilbrunn's accomplishment. There has been endless prevarication about the fact that

neoconservatism is an element of the Jewish experience, even from liberal Jews. Yet Heilbrunn will have none of it. He says that neoconservatism is "intimately linked with the memory of the Holocaust and the allies' failure to save the Jews during the war" and notes that a "peculiar amalgam of intellectual rigor and ethnic resentment ... lies at the heart of the neoconservative outlook."

And here's the topper: a "lifelong antipathy toward the patrician class among the neocons ... prompted them to create their own parallel establishment."

The sociological insights in his story are often exciting. Neocon godfather Norman Podhoretz had "the classic Jewish experience with the WASP elite" but became a "social climber" himself Heilbrunn says. The other godfather, Irving Kristol didn't at first take the late Allan Bloom seriously. Bloom told Heilbrunn that his relationship with Kristol got "easier" once Bloom, like Kristol, had wealth. The neocons didn't like Kissinger because he was *hoffjude*, "a

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court jew of the WASP foreign policy establishment." They didn't like Zbig Brzezinski because he was Polish and the neocons suspected him of Pale-era anti-semitism.

Boiling resentment meant very little without a political program. The neocons got that in the late 1960s. And not surprisingly, the issues had a Jewish character. "With the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem, the 1967 war, and the rise of black anti-Semitism in the United States, neoconservatism was born," Heilbrunn writes. So now Brzezinski was resented because he was against the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and McGeorge Bundy because he wanted to push Israel to make a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

Neoconservative ideas might have been confined to small magazines, but the neocons stunned themselves in the 1970s by gaining traction in American political life—through the offices of Washington Sen. Henry Jackson (whom a Saudi ambassador called "more Jewish than the Jews"). With Jackson's support, the neocons staged their first great victory, pressuring the Soviet Union to free Jews. After Daniel Patrick Moynihan won his New York Senate seat with "strong Jewish support" in 1976, the neocons had a second home.

At that time, of course, they were Democrats. Martin Peretz, the once left-wing editor of *The New Republic*, was so shaken by the Left's friendliness to the Palestinians, that he provided access in his pages to hawks, and became "a major force in the mainstreaming of neoconservative ideas." Douglas Feith, an architect of the Iraq disaster, tells Heilbrunn, "I grew up in a liberal Democratic Jewish household." Again Israel was key. At the age of 15, two years into the Israeli occupation of the West Bank,

Feith wrote a precocious letter to the *New York Times* attacking the State Department policy in the Middle East. "It is appalling the State Department can be so blind to historical precedent as to call for a withdrawal from the captured area." Captured, not occupied.

Israel-centrism made the neocons lousy wardheelers. They turned against Jimmy Carter on foreign policy, and so helped to elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. Not one to slight the power of his subjects, Heilbrunn says that had they not spurned Carter, he might have been re-elected. Neocons came back to the Dems in 1992, again over Israel. George H.W. Bush—"a scion of the WASP establishment"—was "acting like Jimmy Carter when it came to Israel." Knocking off the

Soviet Union gave the neocons a sense of hubris that would doom their ideas about Iraq. Their thinking was also damaged by the fact that the neocons overprized “filial piety”—and so their sons were enlisted in their fathers’ battles without having to develop their own ideas.

Good stuff. Alas, the book’s riches are set in the ancient past: the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s. Didn’t the neocons just wreck our image around the world? Heilbrunn doesn’t get to 9/11 till page 228. There are only 60 pages left, and the social insights that have characterized the first half of the book disappear, giving way to a stentorian, op-ed style. The neocons have “debauched” the idea of intervention. They were “hopelessly naïve about the Arab predicament.”

I hoped that this book would do for the parallel establishment what *The Best and the Brightest* did for the last one in the wake of Vietnam. But Heilbrunn seems to have had only three or four

The more troubling reason is self-censorship. It is one thing to write about the past with dispositive energy and quite another to render sharp judgments about the present. Heilbrunn hints at great ideas without the ability to follow through on them. He says the neocons’ obsession with radical Islam as another cold war was a self-delusion—did they also confuse Palestinian suicide bombers with Nazis? He talks about a parallel establishment and “an elite caste,” but doesn’t do anything to explore the huge pots of money available to the neocons and to politicians who stick by Israel. There is no follow through because all these ideas are close to anti-Semitic “canards,” the word the pro-Israel crowd likes to use when anyone tries to address Jewish influence in public life. Heilbrunn is conscious of these tactics. He notes that Francis Fukuyama said much more about the neocons’ love of Israel in an

Between these knifings, Heilbrunn loses his own point of view. He tells us that Bush fell “into the web that the neo-conservatives had woven around him.” Sounds like a conspiracy. Twice the author uses the word “cabal.” Harvard’s government department “was the first academic neoconservative cabal.” Later there is “the Pentagon cabal of neoconservatives.” Not even Walt and Mearsheimer used the word, though maybe they should have. Certainly, the neocons have often formed cells and have not been transparent about their ideas or their aims.

The book’s promotional copy teases the reader with that revelation. The bold-faced paragraph on the back of the galley asserts that many believe that a “cabal” of neocons launched a “war primarily on Israel’s behalf.” If Heilbrunn doesn’t believe this, he ought to state why not. As it is the reader is left with the shadowy sense that the neocons have a pro-Israel agenda that they are not upfront about. But it isn’t a conspiracy, Heilbrunn warns. The neocons have convinced themselves that the U.S. and Israel have congruent interests. “They just believe this stuff. They’re not agents,” an anonymous source tells him, speaking of Cheney aide David Wurmser, who is married to an Israeli.

Jacob Heilbrunn’s book should be hailed as a real sign of progress in assessing responsibility for the Iraq War, and yet the real work remains undone. I understand why there are inhibitions. Blaming the neocons’ Israel-first worldview for the war raises deep fears among Jews. The liberal *Forward* greeted Walt and Mearsheimer’s paper on the Israel lobby with the bitter retort: “In Dark Times Blame the Jews.” We need to get past this sort of defensiveness if we are going to understand our own democracy, let alone the Middle East. What Heilbrunn rightly calls an “elite caste” could lose status, yes. But others’ lives are at stake. ■

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interviews with Iraq war planners and we learn little about their psyches. How do they feel about Israel? How much money do they make? Do they think there is going to be another Holocaust? What was the importance of Cheney’s American Enterprise Institute chapter (both he and his wife have been fellows at AEI) to his inoculation with neocon doctrine? Heilbrunn doesn’t provide answers.

There are two reasons for his failure, the first vocational, the second far more worrisome. Heilbrunn was evidently under a deadline, and having spent years working on the first part of his book, he appears to have rushed the second half. His writing goes downhill. In the galley, two sentences in a row have the verb “would end up.” Twice on the same page former Sen. Bob Kerrey provides “important ... cover” for the neocons.

article than he did in his subsequent book and chalks the scholar’s silence up to “the bullying tactics the neoconservatives often employed to avert any criticism of Israel, however mild.” Well, Heilbrunn seems to have worried about the same thing.

As for bullying, what are we to make of Heilbrunn’s own vicious outbursts toward anybody who has tried to change American policy toward the hateful Israeli occupation? Thus George Kennan worried about “so-called ethnic lobbies.” Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer’s groundbreaking 2006 paper, “The Israel Lobby,” is dismissed as an “addled essay”, without another word. Jimmy Carter is accused of “crackpot moralism.” Edward Said was “a smooth, urbane purveyor of much nonsense about the Middle East.”

Voting With My Feet

WARREN, MICHIGAN—I love Ed Rollins like a brother, but it's Mike Huckabee who inspired me to return to politics—for such a time as this.

Rollins was my boss at the Reagan White House in the early '80s, and then I followed him to the Reagan-Bush '84 re-election campaign—and thus into morning-in-America glory. We have kept up ever since.

Over the last few years, we have both returned to the church; he's Catholic, I'm Protestant. And we both, from our different perspectives, became fans of Gov. Mike Huckabee. Ed and I both agreed that Huckabee combines solid conservatism, a gentle manner, and a willingness to try new things that reminds us of, yes, Ronald Reagan.

So when the call came, I was ready to hear it. I resigned from FoxNews and from *Newsday*, and signed on as a senior adviser, traveling around with the campaign. (I don't know what my status with *TAC* is; if this piece runs, I'll know I'm still a contributing editor.) But don't let my fancy new title fool you: among my greatest accomplishments has been figuring out how to print a document from my laptop at Kinkos. And yes, I'm re-experiencing campaign life, such as not being able to tell whether your heart is beating faster because you hear something inspiring or because you think you might have made an error in a policy paper or because you have drunk too much coffee and eaten too many donuts.

Actually, not donuts. The Huckabee campaign is lean, if not mean. Without anywhere near the sorts of resources commanded by some other candidates, we bump along without the perks that many campaigns enjoy. Don't get me wrong: It's not *The Grapes of Wrath* for

us out here, but it's not the J.W. Marriott, either.

As for Governor Huckabee, he is a low-cal man. Many people know about his epic diet—the loss of more than 100 pounds—but what sets Huckabee apart from most weight-losers is that he was governor of Arkansas at the time, and so he had the opportunity to convert his own experience into a teachable moment for the citizens of his state. Some will call it sappy, others will call it “Love Thy Neighbor.” Now he is a believer in prevention, including both better diet and more exercise; as he says on the stump, “We don't have health-care, we have sick care.” That is, people stop taking care of themselves, they get sick prematurely, and somebody pays the tab. There's not enough money for that kind of healthcare.

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But the governor is not judgmental; he knows he came from the sort of family where eating too much wasn't such a bad idea—because you could never be too sure about that next meal. As he reminds audiences, “I know the stone from which I was hewn, I know the rock from which I was quarried.”

Like the minister he once was, he pauses to offer a word of encouragement—to an old lady in a walker, to an unemployed husband and father, to a gymnasium full of Christian home-

schoolers in St. John, Michigan; he first apologized for interrupting their basketball game. Then he said to them, “You will face giant challenges in your life, but you are never taller and stronger than when you are on your knees praying to God.” Then he wrapped up, told them to have a good game and “remember to show sportsmanlike conduct.”

For adults, Governor Huckabee has a more serious message. Here's the headline of *The Detroit Free Press* on Jan. 15: “Huckabee appeals to working class/On factory tour, he cites tax plan, family-friendly efforts.” The governor is for free trade, but he is also for fair trade. If the Chinese are “cheating” by putting lead paint on toys and poison in dog food, well, that's not fair. If American workers have to meet stringent labor and environmental standards, then they shouldn't be left unprotected to compete against workers who don't get the benefit of those social-contract basics. Makes sense to me. Is it really a good idea to export our factories overseas, so that the

American middle class is hollowed out? So that others can generate CO2 without regard to emissions controls? So that China can develop its arsenal of non-democracy? I don't think so.

Mike Huckabee, mindful of the Truman precedent, wants a new Fair Deal for Americans. He cares about their jobs but he also cares about traditional family values, including the rights of the unborn. Plus, he was a great governor, he is a great speaker, and he is a very nice guy. That's why I'm here. ■