

In From the Cold

The Right should not wage a Hundred Years War.

By **George W. Carey**

DESPITE THE BELLICOSE rhetoric that emanates from much of the Right, opposition to the interventionist policies initiated by George W. Bush is hardly confined to libertarians and the political Left. It includes traditional conservatives—those conservatives who take their bearings from Burke and Tocqueville, who regard society as both fragile and complex, so complex that no one individual or group can ever presume to comprehend its intricacies.

Traditional conservatives are convinced that global interventions, aside from the attendant loss of life and enormous expense, hold little hope for success since the ingredients for a stable democratic order are seriously lacking in the nations we seek to reform. Key variables include vibrant and healthy intermediate social institutions and associations to serve as effective buffers against an omnipotent government; a decentralized political order in which the principle of subsidiarity is honored; deeply held convictions, religious or customary, that provide meaningful distinctions between state and society, thereby establishing limits to the range of governmental authority; and a recognition of rights with corresponding responsibilities.

While elements of traditional conservatism find expression in classical thought—Aristotle comes immediately to mind—in the American context they are found particularly in the New Humanism of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More and, after World War II, in the major writings of Russell Kirk,

Richard Weaver, and Robert Nisbet. Today, the principles of traditional conservatism inform the works of Peter Stanlis, Bruce Frohnen, and Claes Ryn, to name but a few. And until a relatively recent date, those who embrace traditionalist principles and values found a friendly home within the Republican Party.

The steadfast opposition of traditionalist conservatives to the War on Terror initiated by a Republican president stands in sharp contrast to the stance they assumed during the Cold War, when they justifiably earned an image as hardliners implacably committed to the elimination of the Soviet Union and willing to take bold measures to ensure this end. How can these seemingly inconsistent positions be reconciled?

From my perspective, as a politically aware traditional conservative during the entire Cold War era, the obvious answer is that traditionalists believed that the Soviet Union posed an unprecedented threat to the very existence of Western civilization, whereas the stakes involved in the War on Terror are nowhere near as monumental. While the Cold War called for an active and, at times, militant interventionism, handling our present difficulties requires different and far less drastic measures.

There is a dimension to the traditionalists' perspective of history that explains why they believed the Soviets posed such a historic threat. Simply put, most traditionalists have long perceived our intervention into World War I as a colossal mistake, which initiated

a chain reaction that produced World War II, which in turn set the stage for the Cold War. The traditionalists' inherent aversion to interventionism is readily seen in their longstanding and well-documented rejection of Wilson's version of American exceptionalism and in their derision of his vision of America as a "redeemer nation" with divinely ordained missions. Nevertheless, while holding that we should not have intervened in World War I, traditionalists came to conclude that we could only extricate ourselves from its disastrous consequences through intervention. Once free of the wreckage caused by Wilson's war, however, traditionalists believed we could turn away from interventionist policies and chart a new course.

Writing in 1988, Robert Nisbet contended that since the First World War, the United States had been engaged in what amounted to "a virtual Seventy-Five Years War." With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, traditionalists had every reason to believe that long war had finally come to an end. They welcomed this liberation. Not only did it open up the possibility, consonant with conservative thought stretching back at least 50 years, that we could significantly reduce our role in the world, it also allowed us a freer hand in formulating our foreign policy on the basis of genuine American interests. Above all, the Soviet collapse seemed to reduce considerably the risk of war. But this new and more limited foreign-policy vision was blotted out at its

inception by far grander visions of a New World Order.

To traditionalists' dismay, Nisbet's "Seventy-Five Years War," far from ending, will soon become the "Hundred Years War"—with no end in sight. How did this come to pass? How could a Republican administration have played such a major role in this renewed adventurism with so little resistance from within the party, particularly its congressional wing? And why have criticisms of this conservative turnabout had so little impact? After all, the doctrines used to justify our invasion of Iraq—derivatives of Wilson's vision of American exceptionalism—had been virtually the exclusive domain of the Democratic Party.

There is no simple answer. Certainly party loyalty comes into play. As I learned much to my consternation at Philadelphia Society meetings, even individuals receptive to traditional conservative views felt the need to support Republican policies and officeholders when they came under attack from Democrats. No doubt, among the Republican members of Congress, the lure of party loyalty was even more imperative. They feared that dissension would threaten their careers. Above all, they didn't want to endanger the party's chances of retaining the presidency, the gem of all elective offices given its unrivaled power to disperse wealth and honors.

Neoconservative dominance within the Republican Party is, undoubtedly, another major factor. Not only did these latecomers secure high positions in George W. Bush's administration, they came to dominate major think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and even, to a significant extent, the liberal Brookings Institution. These institutional perches, combined with neocons' disproportionate presence in the prestige media, rendered traditionalists and

other dissidents voices in the wilderness. In stunningly swift order, the mark of "real" conservatives came to be their uncritical support of interventionist policies. Indeed, in important sectors of the political landscape, traditional conservatives are not even considered conservatives anymore.

But the single most important factor accounting for the lack of dissent within Republican ranks is the mentality created and nourished by the Cold War. During that era, individuals were habituated to think in terms of a determined enemy, an "evil empire" intent upon imposing a totalitarian order. In keeping with this state of mind was an unquestioned acceptance of aggressive foreign interventions. American exceptionalism supported and justified our militant policies. If the U.S. was "the last best hope of mankind," our crusades were inherently righteous.

Though the Soviet Union collapsed, the mindset that had been nurtured over a period of 40 years was so ingrained in our political culture that it simply could not be uprooted overnight. Nor were we given much time for reorientation, for American intervention scarcely stopped, resuming swiftly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union with the first Gulf War, whose presumed purpose was to restore "democracy" to Kuwait.

While this and other military ventures served to keep the embers glowing, the later Iraq War fully restored the fires. With the "axis of evil," we found a familiar brand of enemy. More imaginative neocons fanned the flames with a nearly endless list of potential foes, even suggesting that we were now in the midst of "World War IV"—the Cold War being World War III—a titanic struggle for the survival of Western civilization against the forces of "Islamofascism."

In retrospect, had traditionalists exercised greater prudence during the Cold War—if only by critically appraising

what our government was telling us about the capabilities of the Soviet Union—the chances of introducing realism into 21st-century policies might have been enhanced. At the very least, traditionalists can be faulted for accepting virtually every Cold War policy or action, including the Vietnam War, as vital to confronting the Soviet challenge. The most damaging legacy of the Cold War mentality has been the effective elimination of strategic alternatives in our foreign and military policies. As the Lyndon Johnson tapes reveal, he recognized at an early stage that disengagement from Vietnam would be the most prudent policy. Yet these tapes also show that this was a path not taken because doing so would have been an act of political suicide, given the certainty that hardline Republicans would charge LBJ and his party with being "soft on communism."

Barack Obama's Afghan policies were likely formulated against a similar backdrop. He could not show "weakness"—could not seriously consider the gradual reduction of forces as a logical course of action—for fear of the political fallout. The lamentable fact is that for decades many, if not most, Democrats have for reasons of sheer political expediency also acquiesced in following the "imperatives" dictated by the Cold War mentality.

Is there any possibility of overcoming this legacy? Perhaps, if enough Republicans and Democrats stand up to the new breed of hardline Cold Warriors. Otherwise, we will continue to fight the last war, inflating distant threats into epic enemies until such time as the American people come to their senses or run out of money. ■

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U Turn

I walked up to U Street from Howard, trading the college-student detritus of broken ballpoints and shattered brown bottles of domestic beer for the hipster

scurf of cigarette butts. I wove through a neighborhood of narrow streets and row houses, red brick alternating with sherbet colors, passing through a low-rent patch of flea markets and island-themed takeouts. And then, without warning or boundary, I was in a hot little clutch of boutiques and restaurants. The “New U” is at least a decade old now, but it still startles me.

I always remember U Street the way it was in the '90s: a narrow spine of punk clubs and fast-food joints, dive bars and speakeasies, surrounded by abandoned hulks and haunted by men who slept on other people's steps. Some of the buildings burnt out in the King riots had never been fixed. Plants poked their flat, fringed leaves through the windows, with a tropical air of casual disregard for human projects. U Street was like a tiny outpost on a strange planet, where travelers huddled together against the hostile expanse of the past.

But I—so protected, so desperately pursuing unsafety—was happy there. I was in high school; I was still on the Left; all my friends were still friends with one another. When I think about 11th grade, it seems always sunny—a whole year made of ice cream and glitter. The next year there would be cheap teenage tragedies like breakups and two real disasters that won't be made right in this life. But for that year, I was happy.

U Street was changing. There were already a couple of shops that were like thrift stores, only too expensive for us;

we learned to call these “vintage.” There were already ritual complaints about gentrification. There were already a few storefronts with sleek aerodynamic space-age fonts.

But inside the clubs, everything was still dark, cheap, and sincere. Politics was our sex and vice versa; in an intimate corner two husky-voiced teens with dyed hair would blush at each other and fumble for words as they tried to explain their beliefs about corporations. Onstage even the most crass displays seemed to glow with the romance of political dissent: “In her kiss, I taste the revolution!” We went to shows at the Beehive Collective—yes, they called it that on purpose—where the communards silkscreened their logo onto men's dress shirts for the citoyennes to wear.

The Beehive is long gone. Was it replaced by the gay sports bar or the upscale bakery? It's impossible to navigate by the buildings, since the Beehive's building was Old U to the core, all white peeling paint and pipes exposed at random and castoff furniture in the yard.

There's no dead air around U Street now. There's a vibrant, cheapjack neighborhood snuggled cheek-to-cheek with the hipsters. Then there's this huge spray of money, like an explosion in a honeycomb, coating everything with golden ease. Every storefront is bright. The line for Ben's Chili Bowl stretches deep into the adjoining alley. (I love Ben's—it's unpatriotic not to—but I

would not wait in line in an alley for a chili dog no matter how many presidents endorsed it.) I was surprised and pleased to see that the AIDS-relief thrift shop is still standing, although it's overshadowed now. Its shuttered windows are louche and dulled amid the champagne chatter of the street. The iconic business of U Street is no longer an illicit after-hours bar; it's a pricey furniture place called Home Rule.

The last time I went to U Street for a show, it was raining, white sluicing blankets foaming out from the gutters. A girl I'd been friends with in high school is a jazz singer now, and she'd been booked at a local club. I still remembered her voice, by turns knotty and caressing, smoky and coppery. I invited some new friends, people who had never known me when I was a leftist, to come hear her sing. I walked down 16th Street under an unreliable umbrella and found that the club had been shut down for some kind of code violation. I waited in the rain. My new friends showed up, and we got beers at a cute, glossy new place. My old friend never showed; she knew the score.

Yesterday, walking home from U Street, at the outskirts of the neighborhood I passed a bookstore called Pulp. (Of course it is.) In the window a sign showed a quotation attributed to Martin Luther King: “The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.”

It's impossible for me to miss my old extremism. It's impossible for me to feel settled in my new. ■

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