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The Impact of Neoconservatism on U.S. Domestic and Foreign Policy.

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In their kind invitation the sponsors of this program, to be attended by leading editors and journalist from Germany, informed me, "European media observers are particularly puzzled by the role of neoconservatives in U.S. domestic and foreign policy." Given the inaccuracy of the reporting of Europe's media observers when they deal with neoconservatism, I think it rather kind to attribute their errors to puzzlement. After all, mere puzzlement would result in reporting that is sometimes excessively hostile, sometimes excessively favorable, sometimes accurate. But European media observers are uniformly hostile, in part because of the pervasive dislike of President Bush, in part because the secular European press and public has decided that neoconservatism is dominated by Christian fanatics (or a Jewish cabal), in part because of American aggressiveness in the war on terror, in part because of Kyoto, and in part for reasons that I am certain you can more easily catalogue than I. This pervasive hostility was demonstrated in foreign press coverage of hurricane Katrina, a mixture of gloating and finger-pointing so appalling that Tony Blair found it embarrassing.

Which is why I welcome the opportunity you have given me to explain the role of neo conservatives in the making of U.S. domestic and foreign policy.

Start with a disclaimer -- neoconservatism is not a doctrine, it is more a “persuasion”, to borrow from Irving Kristol, or a “sensibility”, to cite Josh Muravchick, or a “tendency”, to cite Norman Podhoretz. In short, there are non-trivial differences among many people whom the media classify as neoconservatives. So I do not presume to speak for the “tendency”.

But there are also some common “tendencies”.

The first relates to method. Neocons wage their battles in the seminar rooms of universities, in the think tanks of Washington, New York, London and elsewhere, and in the media. As one not-too-friendly observer put it, “Over their lunchroom tables, in their seminar rooms, on the covers of their small magazines” the press their views on policymakers. So this is no cabal, but a number of intellectuals and policymakers waging and winning -- for now at least -- a battle of ideas.

The second common tendency is reflected in a set of views on foreign policy. Let me repeat the warning I gave

earlier: generalization is dangerous. But sometimes necessary. So here goes:

1. Neocons believe in the greatness and goodness of America, that it is a special place, some believe created with the blessing of God. Our motives are benign; we have never permanently inhabited foreign soil -- except in graves dug to house soldiers fighting to keep Europe free from tyranny. In short, we are good guys, straight-forward, less sophisticated than Europeans, and proud of it.

2. I think it fair to say that neocons are suspicious of efforts to undermine the paramount role of the nation-state in world affairs, and to substitute international organizations of various kinds. That is not because of any xenophobia, but (a) because neocons have greater faith in national institutions that are accountable to their electorates, than in international institutions such as the UN and the EU, accountable only to their own bureaucracies; and (b) because experience is a hard teacher, and it teaches that international organizations are generally ineffective, often corrupt, and very often interested in policies merely because they embarrass America or give vent to the anti-Semitism of many nations. The UN, of course, is the perfect example of an organization corrupt to its core, and stirring itself to action only when

delegates rise to their feet to cheer an anti-Israel resolution or a speaker -- Chávez is only the latest example -- who denounces the United States.

3. I also think it fair to say that neocons are less apt to shy away from the use of military power than are those further to the left on the political spectrum. As recent experience with North Korea and Iran should demonstrate, an administration populated by many neoconservatives is quite content to rely on normal diplomacy to achieve its objectives, but it is also unwilling to forgo the military option as readily and totally as are most European countries. Neocons believe in principles, Europeans in process. The neocon position might best be summed up as follows: Diplomacy if possible, force if necessary; the UN if possible, ad hoc coalitions of the willing or unilateral action if necessary; preemptive strikes if it is reasonable to anticipate hostile action on the part of our enemies.

4. Neoconservatives -- again, I emphasize that this is a tendency, not a doctrine -- or most of them, believe that America's security interests are best served by encouraging the spread of democracy abroad, and that all of the peoples of the world share Western values and the desire for freedom. That does not necessarily mean boots on the

ground; it means as well books in the libraries. It is on the question of the universality of western values that neocons are most likely to disagree, with many arguing against the Bush-Blair belief that “they” really want to be more like “us”.

5. Neocons do not have a presumption in favor of the status quo.

Let me now try an equally dangerous set of generalizations on neoconservatives’ views on domestic policy:

1. It is fair to say that most neoconservatives do not share their conservative friends’ fear of budget deficits. The view is: policy first, bookkeeping later. Couple this with a belief in supply-side-economics that, in its vulgar form tells us that tax cuts generate rather than reduce revenues, and you have a dangerous cocktail that if imbibed can produce irresponsible behavior. Still, it seems to be the case that recent tax cuts did increase the flow of revenue to the Treasury, and that the policy-first, bookkeeping later program permits the sort of grand vision that a rich country can afford. Consider this: there is a huge row going on over how to pay for the \$200 billion estimated cost of the relief and reconstruction effort in the wake of Katrina. Look at that

in the context of a \$13 trillion economy that is growing at about 5% per year, or by \$600 billion per year.

2. Neoconservatives generally do not share conservatives' fear of big government. President Bush has presided over the largest expansion of the federal government since Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, has never vetoed a spending bill, even of the most wasteful sort, and has taken the federal government into areas previously reserved to the states, such as education.

3. Neoconservatives -- there are many exceptions to this -- are more congenial to social conservatives who oppose abortion, are unworried by the use of federal funds in religious schools, and fume at the coarseness of aspects of cultural life in America.

I could add much more, and perhaps consume an hour discussing the nuances, exceptions, and counter-examples to what I have just said. But that would take away from the time we have for discussion, so I will stop here.