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The voice of Neoconservatism

On Irving Kristol’s essays

With the publication of a capacious volume of essays by Irving Kristol under the title *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, the movement set in motion by its author—a movement that began as a discussion of ideas and proved in time to have immense political consequences—may be said to have entered a new phase. No longer is Neoconservatism the preserve of a coterie of embattled intellectuals regarded with suspicion by conservatives and with a good deal of loathing and contempt by the liberal Left. Neoconservatism has now achieved a degree of legitimacy and influence that few of its acolytes could have imagined a quarter of a century ago. If not all of the ideas and criticisms contained in this book can yet be said to represent the conventional political wisdom of the 1990s, it is nonetheless remarkable to observe how many of its analyses and sentiments have permeated public debate. On a good many of the issues that have transformed the way the future of our society, and our world, is now discussed—issues ranging from the death of socialism and the problematical character of the welfare state to the adversary culture of American intellectuals and its baleful influence on education, the media, and public policy—it was largely the voice of Neoconservatism that formulated the arguments and framed the debate. And that voice, more often than not, was Irving Kristol’s.

This is the reason that we regard the publication of *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, the most definitive collection of his writings that Mr. Kristol has given us, as an important event. Some of the individual essays in this book are almost as interesting for their original dates of publication as for their intellectual content—e.g., the essay “Welfare: The Best of Intentions, the Worst of Results,” first published in 1971 and now indeed, nearly a quarter of a century later, does represent what has since become the established opinion on the subject. Or the essays “The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals,” published in 1979, and “Socialism: An Obituary for an Idea,” published in 1976. “What rules the world is ideas,” Mr. Kristol wrote in his essay “On Conservatism and Capitalism” in 1975, “because ideas define the way reality is perceived; and, in the absence of religion, it is out of culture—pictures, poems, songs, philosophy—that these ideas are born.” It was from this emphasis on ideas that the influence of Neoconservatism derived, and on the cogency of its ideas that its influence has prospered.
Especially for newcomers to the subject, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* is the book to read if you want to know what Neoconservatism is about but were afraid to ask. And as an inducement to that pursuit, we offer here some representative passages.

**On the importance of ideas**

For two centuries, the very important people who managed the affairs of this society could not believe in the importance of ideas—until one day they were shocked to discover that their children, having been captured and shaped by certain ideas, were either rebelling against their authority or seceding from their society. The truth is that ideas are all-important. The massive and seemingly-solid institutions of any society—the economic institutions, the political institutions, the religious institutions—are always at the mercy of the ideas in the heads of the people who populate these institutions. The leverage of ideas is so immense that a slight change in the intellectual climate can and will—perhaps slowly, but nevertheless inexorably—twist a familiar institution into an unrecognizable shape. If one looks at the major institutions of American society today—the schools, the family, the business corporation, the federal government—we can see this process going on before our eyes.

**On intellectuals under socialism**

The fate of intellectuals under socialism is disillusionment, dissent, exile, silence. In politics, means determine ends, and socialism everywhere finds its incarnation in coercive bureaucracies that are contemptuously dismissive of the ideals that presumably legitimatize them, even while establishing these ideals as a petrified orthodoxy. The most interesting fact of contemporary intellectual life is the utter incapacity of so-called socialist countries to produce socialist intellectuals—or even, for that matter, to tolerate socialist intellectuals. If you want to meet active socialist intellectuals, you can go to Oxford or Berkeley or Paris or Rome. There is no point in going to Moscow or Peking or Belgrade or Bucharest or Havana. Socialism today is a dead end for the very intellectuals who have played so significant a role in moving the modern world down that street.

**On the “welfare explosion” since 1964**

This “explosion” was created—in part intentionally, in larger part unwittingly—by public officials and public employees who were executing public policies as part of a “War on Poverty.” And these policies had been advocated and enacted by many of the same people who were subsequently so bewildered by the “welfare explosion.” Not surprisingly it took them a while to realize that the problem they were trying to solve was the problem they were creating.

**On welfare and the family**

One must emphasize here that the question of race or ethnicity is of secondary importance. It is true that the Negro family has experienced historical vicissitudes that make it a relatively vulnerable institution. But it is also probable—I would go so far as to say certain—that if the Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century America had had something comparable to our present welfare system, there would have been a “welfare explosion” then, and a sharp increase in Irish family disorganization, too. The family is, in our society, a vital economic institution. Welfare robs it of its economic function. Above all, welfare robs the head of the household of his economic function, and tends to make him a “superfluous man.” Welfare, it must be remembered, competes with his (usually low) earning ability; and the more generous the welfare program, the worse he makes out in this competition.
On multiculturalism & the universities

It is in its most intense and extreme form ... that multiculturalism is on its way to being a major educational, social, and eventually political problem. This version is propagated on our college campuses by a coalition of nationalist-racist blacks, radical feminists, “gays” and lesbians, and a handful of aspiring demagogues who claim to represent various ethnic minorities. In this coalition, it is the blacks who provide the hard core of energy, because it is they who can intimidate the faculty and the administration, fearful of being branded “racist.” This coalition’s multiculturalism is an ideology whose educational program is subordinated to a political program that is, above all, anti-American and anti-Western.

On the legacy of sexual liberation

“Sexual liberation,” as it emerged in the 1950s, has turned out to be—as it was destined to be—a male scam. Easy, available sex is pleasing to men and debasing to women, who are used and abused in the process. Nevertheless, the agenda of a candid, casual attitude toward sex was vigorously sponsored by feminists who mistakenly perceived it as a step toward “equality.” Even today there are some laggard feminists who are firmly persuaded that mixed dormitories and mixed bathrooms on a university campus represent such a step. But true equality between men and women can only be achieved by a moral code that offers women some protection against male predators— and all men are, to one degree or another, natural predators when it comes to sex.

On the cultural revolution

From a dissenting culture to a counterculture, we have finally arrived at a nihilistic anticulture. This anticulture permits the postmodernists to abolish the distinction between what used to be called “highbrow” art—it also used to be called “culture,” without equivocation—and “popular” culture. The modern movement in the arts, from 1870 to 1950, was distinctly “highbrow.” It was “difficult,” and it took decades for even our educated classes to feel comfortable with its works in literature and art. A whole new generation had to be trained to understand and appreciate T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce in literature, Picasso, Miró, and Klee in painting. Today, in contrast, at some of our best universities you can take a course for credit in the meaning of a popular comic strip, which explores the ways in which American society and Western civilization in general are infested with race, sex, and class antagonism. Indeed, many students in literature, the arts, and the humanities today, in pursuit of self-expression, reveal an extraordinary ignorance of, and lack of interest in, their avant-garde, modernist forebears. So anti-traditional are they that they happily dispossess themselves of their formative, antibourgeois traditions. This explains why the mission of an institution such as the National Endowment for the Arts has become a mission impossible. The so-called “arts” it was founded to support have become enmeshed with “arts” that were unimaginable a few decades ago—indeed, that would never have been designated as “arts.”

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